



FREEDOM NOW

Honorary Chair
The Most Reverend Desmond M. Tutu

March 18, 2016

Media Release

15 Azerbaijani Prisoners of Conscience Released

Washington, D.C.: Freedom Now is very happy to announce that 15 prisoners of conscience have been released in Azerbaijan this week. Among them were human rights defender Rasul Jafarov, civil society leader Anar Mammadli, journalist Hilal Mammadov, youth activist Omar Mammadov, and NIDA members Mahamad Azizov, Rashad Hassanov, and Rashadat Akhundov. President Ilham Aliyev issued pardons for the individuals ahead of the Novruz holiday, which celebrates the coming of spring. Journalist Rauf Mirgadirov was also released after a court commuted his sentence.

“We welcome the long overdue release of these fifteen men; a relief for their families and friends. And while we celebrate their freedom, we must bear in mind that they should never have been imprisoned in the first place,” said Freedom Now’s executive director Maran Turner. “We must also recognize that these 15 political prisoners represent a fraction of the dozens of individuals who remain in jail because of their exercise of fundamental rights in Azerbaijan. We call on the Government of Azerbaijan to immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners, including journalist Khadija Ismayilova and human rights lawyer Intigam Aliyev.”

Rasul Jafarov is a human rights defender and chairman of the Human Rights Club, an organization that campaigns for human rights in Azerbaijan. Mr. Jafarov led the innovative “Sing for Democracy” campaign when Azerbaijan hosted the Eurovision song contest in 2012 to bring international attention to human rights abuses. He was arrested in August 2014 and charged with tax evasion, illegal business activities, and abuse of authority. Following a blatantly unfair trial, he was convicted and sentenced to six and one-half years in prison. Just this week, the European Court ruled his detention arbitrary and ordered him to be released.

Anar Mammadli is a civil society leader who was sentenced in May 2014 to five and one-half years in prison on charges of tax evasion, illegal business activities, and abuse of office. Prior to his imprisonment in December 2013, Mr. Mammadli led the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center, a respected NGO in Azerbaijan that worked to protect democratic rights, most notably through election monitoring. Mr. Mammadli was arrested and tried along with his colleague, Bashir Sulemanli, who was pardoned and released in March 2015.

Hilal Mammadov is a journalist and minority rights activist who was arrested in June 2012 and sentenced to five years in prison on fabricated drug charges. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled his detention to be arbitrary in November 2014 and earlier this year the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Mr. Mammadov suffered inhuman treatment during his imprisonment.

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Our mission is to free prisoners of conscience through focused legal, political and public relations advocacy efforts.

Omar Mammadov is a youth activist and blogger who was arrested in January 2014 on fabricated drug charges. Mr. Mammadov's family was previously harassed by Azerbaijani authorities because of their son's involvement in the N!DA youth group and his blog posts critical of the government. In July 2014, he was sentenced to five years in prison.

Mahamad Azizov, Rashad Hassanov, and Rashadat Akhundov are members of the N!DA youth activists group, dedicated to defending constitutional and human rights. The group organized several demonstrations in early 2013 to protest the death of military conscripts from hazing and bullying. In March 2013, Azerbaijani authorities arrested seven N!DA members and another in October. All activists were charged with organizing a mass riot, possession of illegal drugs, and possession of explosives. They were sentenced in November 2013 to between seven and eight years in prison. Three activists were released in October 2014 and two in December 2014 under a presidential pardon.

Since 2011, Azerbaijan has detained more than 100 human rights defenders, political opposition leaders, civil society leaders, religious activists, lawyers, and journalists. These cases of political prisoners were monitored by Leyla Yunus and Mr. Jafarov in 2014, shortly before they were arrested. Many of these prisoners have already been convicted and received lengthy prison terms, including prominent human rights lawyer Intigam Aliyev. Mr. Aliyev was sentenced in April 2015 to seven and one-half years in prison. Khadija Ismayilova, a journalist, was convicted of similar charges in September 2015 and is currently serving a sentence of seven and one half years. Ilgar Mammadov, an opposition politician was sentenced to seven years in 2013, and remains in prison despite a judgment by the European Court of Human Rights deeming his detention arbitrary and politically motivated.

To learn more about Freedom Now's work in Azerbaijan, and on behalf of these cases, visit our website: <http://www.freedom-now.org/campaign/cases-in-azerbaijan/>