



FREEDOM NOW

Honorary Chair  
The Most Reverend Desmond M. Tutu

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**Media Release**

**Freedom Now Condemns Sentencing of Leyla and Arif Yunus**

Washington, D.C.: Freedom Now strongly condemns today's sentencing of Leyla Yunus, a prominent Azerbaijani human rights defender and activist, to eight and one-half years in prison and her husband Arif Yunus, an academic and activist, to seven years in prison. The charges brought against the couple were clearly politically motivated and we call for their immediate release.

"Today's sentencing of Leyla and Arif Yunus is shocking and frankly shameful," said Freedom Now's Executive Director Maran Turner. "Leyla and Arif are peaceful activists who dedicated their lives to defending human rights and promoting reconciliation between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Given the condition of their health and the quality of medical care they have received, the court's decision is equivalent to a death sentence."

Mrs. Yunus is the director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy, a Baku-based organization that promotes human rights and regional peace. In this capacity, she has focused on forced evictions, political prisoners, and building "people-to-people" relationships between citizens of Azerbaijan and Armenia. A longtime critic of government policies going back to the Soviet era, Mrs. Yunus has been the target of reprisals in the past. In 2011, authorities bulldozed the offices of the Institute for Peace and Democracy hours after her work was chronicled in the New York Times. Mr. Yunus also works with the Institute for Peace and Democracy, where he headed the organization's work on conflict studies and migration. Mr. Yunus, like his wife, was trained as an historian and has worked to promote fundamental rights in Azerbaijan for decades.

Mr. and Mrs. Yunus were arrested on July 30, 2014 and charged with tax evasion, illegal business activities, and abuse of authority. The Azerbaijani government later added charges of treason, fraud, and forgery. The couple were held in pre-trial detention for a nearly a year before their trial finally began on July 27, 2015. Journalists and civil society activists were barred from attending the proceedings.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Yunus suffer from serious health conditions and local advocates have reported that the couple has not received adequate medical treatment. Mr. Yunus collapsed multiple times during the trial due to his hypertension and required medical attention before the proceedings could continue. Observers noted that he could barely walk and had a walnut-sized lump on his head that had not been treated.

Since 2011, Azerbaijan has detained over 100 human rights defenders, political opposition leaders, civil society leaders, lawyers, and journalists. These prisoners of conscience were catalogued by Mrs. Yunus and fellow prisoner of conscience Rasul Jafarov in 2014, shortly before their own arrests. Many of these prisoners of conscience have already been convicted and received lengthy

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

prison terms, including Mr. Jafarov and prominent human rights lawyer Intigam Aliyev. Mr. Jafarov and Mr. Aliyev were sentenced in April to six and one-half years and seven and one-half years in prison, respectively. Khadija Ismayilova, a journalist, is currently on trial and facing similar charges.