



FREEDOM NOW

Honorary Chair
The Most Reverend Desmond M. Tutu

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Media Release

Freedom Now Welcomes Release of Azerbaijani Activist Arif Yunus to House Arrest

Washington, D.C.: Freedom Now welcomes today's release of Arif Yunus to house arrest. An academic and activist, Mr. Yunus was convicted of politically motivated charges in August and sentenced to seven years in prison. His wife and co-defendant, Leyla Yunus, was sentenced to eight and one half years and still remains in prison.

"We applaud today's decision by the Baku Court of Appeal to transfer Arif to house arrest, and we hope the same is done for Leyla," said Freedom Now's Executive Director Maran Turner. "However, the initial judgment rendered against Leyla and Arif is a travesty of justice. We call on the Government of Azerbaijan to immediately and unconditionally release both Arif and Leyla and drop all charges and convictions."

Despite the transfer to house arrest, Mr. Yunus is banned from the leaving the country and restrictions on his movements are unclear.

The Court of Appeals issued today's order because of Mr. Yunus' rapidly deteriorating health. 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 initial trial due to an attack of hypertension; he 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. During a recent court appearance during an appeal hearing, observers noted Mrs. Yunus had bruises around her neck. Mr. Yunus' health has suffered further since November 6 when he went on a hunger strike to protest prison conditions.

Mr. Yunus works for the Institute for Peace and Democracy, a Baku-based organization that promotes human rights and regional peace, 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. Mrs. Yunus is the director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy. 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. 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

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

began on July 27, 2015. Journalists and civil society activists were barred from attending the proceedings. Mr. and Mrs. Yunus still face a separate trial for the treason charges.

Since 2011, Azerbaijan has detained more than 100 human rights defenders, political opposition leaders, civil society leaders, religious activists, lawyers, and journalists. These prisoners of conscience were catalogued by Mrs. Yunus and fellow prisoner of conscience Rasul Jafarov in 2014, shortly before they were arrested. Many of these prisoners of conscience have already been convicted and received lengthy 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, was convicted of similar charges in September and is currently serving a sentence of seven and one half years.