



FREEDOM NOW

Honorary Chair
The Most Reverend Desmond M. Tutu

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Media Release

Freedom Now Welcomes Release of Azerbaijani Activist Leyla Yunus

Washington, DC: Freedom Now welcomes today's release of Leyla Yunus and the commutation of her sentence to five years probation. A human rights defender and activist, Ms. Yunus was convicted of politically motivated charges in August and sentenced to eight and one-half years in prison. Her husband and co-defendant, Arif Yunus, was sentenced to seven years and released under house arrest last month. Despite the commutation, the legal situation of the Mr. and Ms. Yunus remains the same and they still face a separate trial on charges of treason.

"We applaud today's decision by the Baku Court of Appeal to commute Leyla's sentence," 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."

The Court of Appeals issued today's order because of Ms. Yunus' rapidly deteriorating health. Both Mr. and Ms. Yunus suffer from serious health conditions and local advocates have reported that the couple has not received adequate medical treatment. Ms. Yunus suffers from diabetes and hepatitis C. During a recent court appearance during an appeal hearing, observers noted she had bruises around her neck. Ms. Yunus' health has suffered further since early December when liver problems brought on by hepatitis caused severe digestive problems and caused her to lose a dangerous amount of weight.

Ms. 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, Ms. 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 Ms. 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.

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 Ms. Yunus and fellow prisoner of conscience Rasul Jafarov in 2014, shortly before they were arrested. Many of these prisoners of conscience have already been

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

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.