



FREEDOM NOW

Azerbaijani Court Orders Return of Leyla and Arif Yunus

Today, the Baku Court of Appeals rejected a motion by Leyla and Arif Yunus' lawyer to allow his clients to take part in their appeal trial via a video link. The court ordered the couple to return to Azerbaijan from the Netherlands to participate in the appeal hearing.

“The Azerbaijani government must immediately rescind this order,” said Freedom Now Executive Director Maran Turner. “Leyla and Arif have lived in the Netherlands for more than one year, reunited with their daughter after a long, painful period of imprisonment that has had dire consequences for their health. The insistence of the government of Azerbaijan that Leyla and Arif appear in person raises concerns that authorities may return them to custody.”

Leyla Yunus is a long-time leader in civil society in Azerbaijan. She was the director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy, a Baku-based organization that promoted human rights and regional peace. In this work, she focused on forced evictions, political prisoners, and building “people-to-people” relationships between citizens of Azerbaijan and Armenia. Arif Yunus also worked with the Institute for Peace and Democracy, where he headed the organization’s work on conflict studies and migration.

Leyla and Arif were arrested in July 2015 and the next month they were convicted of tax evasion, abuse of authority, fraud, forgery, and illegal business activities and sentenced to eight and one-half years and seven years, respectively. In November 2015, authorities released Arif into house arrest. The next month Leyla was released and her sentenced was commuted to five years probation. In April 2016, the Supreme Court allowed the couple to travel abroad for medical treatment. Shortly afterwards, they left for the Netherlands where they remain today.

New hearings were ordered last month after the court started examining an appeal from the pair, who are seeking full exoneration.

There are more than 120 prisoners of conscience in Azerbaijan. For more information about the ongoing crackdown and our past work in the country, please visit our Azerbaijan campaign page.