



FREEDOM NOW

Human Rights Defenders Leyla and Arif Yunus Leaves Azerbaijan for the Netherlands

Washington, D.C. – Freedom Now is pleased to announce that today Azerbaijani human rights defenders Leyla and Arif Yunus were finally allowed to travel out of the country and have arrived in the Netherlands. The Yunuses had their sentences commuted to five years' probation in December 2015 after spending nearly a year and a half in prison on politically motivated charges.

“We are relieved that the Azerbaijani authorities have lifted the travel ban and allowed Leyla and Arif to seek medical treatment that has been denied to them for 16 months,” said Freedom Now Executive Director Maran Turner. “We call on the authorities to lift travel bans against other recently released prisoners requiring medical care, such as human rights lawyer Intigam Aliyev.”

Although there has been no official explanation from Azerbaijani authorities regarding the order to lift the travel ban, it comes at a time when both Mr. and Ms. Yunus require serious medical evaluation and treatment. Ms. Yunus suffers from diabetes and hepatitis C. During an appearance at an appeal hearing, observers noted she had bruises around her neck. Ms. Yunus' health has suffered further since December 2015 when liver problems brought on by hepatitis caused severe digestive problems and caused her to lose a dangerous amount of weight. Mr. Yunus collapsed multiple times during the initial trial due to an attack of hypertension; he required medical attention before the proceedings could continue.

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 long-time 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. Yunus is also a staff member with the Institute and, like his wife, was trained as an historian and has worked to promote fundamental rights in Azerbaijan for decades

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. They were sentenced in August 2015 with Ms. Yunus receiving eight and one-half years and Mr. Yunus seven years.

Mr. Yunus was released from prison in November 2015 for health reasons and kept under house arrest. Ms. Yunus was released the following month and the Court of Appeals commuted the couple's sentence to five years' probation. However, the couple still face a treason charge and the Supreme Court rejected their request to travel abroad for medical treatment as recently as January 2016.

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

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 Ms. Yunus and Rasul Jafarov in 2014, shortly before they were arrested. Many of these prisoners have already been convicted and received lengthy prison terms, including opposition politician Ilgar Mammadov, sentenced to seven years in 2013 he 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/>