



FREEDOM NOW

### *No Progress on Key Reforms*

Azerbaijan: No Progress on Key Reforms  
Transparency Group Should Suspend Country's Membership

(London, March 2, 2017) – The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), a prominent international coalition, should suspend Azerbaijan's membership for failing to carry out key reforms, a coalition of 21 groups including Freedom Now, Human Rights Watch, ARTICLE 19, and International Media Support said today. The EITI, during its board meeting in Bogota, Colombia, on March 8 and 9, 2017, will review Azerbaijan's efforts to ease its repression of civil society groups as the EITI had required.

“The Azerbaijani government is snubbing the EITI by ignoring its requirements for reforms and by systematically dismantling the country's independent civil society,” said Giorgi Gogia, South Caucasus director at Human Rights Watch. “Following numerous reviews and warnings, the EITI should suspend Azerbaijan's further participation until the government makes serious, lasting changes to allow nongovernmental groups to operate freely in Azerbaijan.”

The EITI brings together governments, companies, and nongovernmental groups to encourage better governance of resource-rich countries by fostering open public debate about the use of oil, gas, and mining revenues. The EITI requires member governments to foster “an enabling environment for civil society” and to “refrain from actions which result in narrowing or restricting public debate in relation to implementation of the EITI.”

At its most recent board meeting, in October 2016, the EITI gave Azerbaijan four months to eliminate legal and bureaucratic obstacles inhibiting civil society engagement in the initiative. It required Azerbaijan to simplify procedures for registration of nongovernmental organizations and for the receipt and registration of grants from foreign donors. The reforms would eliminate some mechanisms for the government to interfere with and stop the work of independent groups. The EITI had downgraded Azerbaijan from a full member to a candidate country in April 2015, due to the government's interference with independent civil society.

A joint letter signed by 22 human rights groups worldwide and sent to EITI board members on February 10, 2017 assessed the Azerbaijan government's lack of progress on the reforms identified by the EITI and called on the board to suspend Azerbaijan.

In January, Azerbaijan's Cabinet of Ministers adopted two decisions changing regulations for donor organizations and grant registrations. While the new regulations simplify some procedures for grant registration and reduce the number of required documents, they do not repeal the restrictive laws and fail to meet the EITI's demands, the groups said.

“Superficial regulatory changes don't address the fundamental issues that led to downgrading Azerbaijan's status in the EITI, or the specific corrective actions set by the board,” said Katie Morris, head of Europe and Central Asia for ARTICLE 19. “The credibility of the EITI validation process requires the initiative to suspend Azerbaijan for its failure to comply with the initiative's commitment to civil society participation.”

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The Azerbaijani authorities repeatedly harass activists who advocate good governance and transparency, preventing civil society groups from participating in public debate and advocacy, including on extractive industries, the pillar of Azerbaijan's economy. Two members of the local civil society coalition that participates in the EITI remain jailed on spurious charges, and several other members have been forced to flee the country, fearing politically motivated prosecutions.

“Local groups in Azerbaijan are counting on the EITI to remain principled and stand up for them and their essential contributions to public accountability and transparency,” said Gulnara Akhundova, head of global response at International Media Support. “Azerbaijan’s embattled civil society deserves nothing less than clear and unbiased support from EITI’s international board.”

To read the joint letter to the EITI board members, please visit:

<http://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/02/joint-letter-eiti-board-members>