



FREEDOM NOW

Open letter by the Civic Solidarity Platform, NGOs from Sport for Rights coalition and other NGOs to His Holiness Pope Francis on political prisoners in Azerbaijan

Dear Holy Father,

This autumn you will be visiting Azerbaijan. The citizens and the authorities in this country, as well as others, will be listening carefully to the message you deliver in public and in private. Similarly to the words addressed in Armenia in June, your speech in Azerbaijan will carry a special weight as they will come at a time when the threat of a return to war hangs over Armenia and Azerbaijan and the resulting destabilisation could affect the entire Caucasus.

We, the undersigned NGOs, members of the Civic Solidarity Platform and Sport for Rights coalition, as well as other NGOs, kindly entreat Your Holiness to help bring lasting peace and respect for human rights in the region and particularly in Azerbaijan. We kindly ask that you call for the release of those political prisoners still remaining in prison. One of them, Ilgar Mammadov, an opposition politician, remains in prison despite a European Court of Human Rights judgment delivered more than two years ago, stating that he was convicted without any evidence, with the aim of silencing his criticism of the government.[1]

Your predecessor, Pope John Paul II, said to politicians on his visit to Baku in 2002 that, “your specific activity is the service of the common good, the promotion of legality and justice, the guarantee of freedom and prosperity for all...Politics requires honesty and accountability. The people should be able to feel understood and protected...Those who accept responsibility for administering public affairs cannot deceive themselves: people do not forget! Just as they remember with gratitude those who have laboured honestly in the service of the common good, so they pass on to their children and grandchildren bitter criticism of those who abused power to enrich themselves”[2].

Unfortunately, this message remains valid today in Azerbaijan where political and economic corruption is rampant and human rights are not respected. This message remains especially pertinent in Azerbaijan where dozens of political prisoners continue to languish in detention. On their behalf, we respectfully ask you to raise this issue with Azerbaijan’s authorities and call for the unconditional release of all imprisoned on false charges.

Peace and respect for human rights are inextricably connected. Peace must come to the Caucasus and with it freedom, for both of which Pope John Paul II called. We hope that your words will encourage the leaders with whom you meet to choose a political path that embodies the spirit of freedom and respect for human rights.

With every best wish. Yours sincerely,

On behalf of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Poland,

Danuta Przywara

President of the Board

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

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[1] I. Mammadov v. Azerbaijan, judgment of 22 May 2014, application no. 15172/13.

[1] Address of the Holy Father at a meeting with religious, political, cultural and arts representatives, Baku Presidential Palace, Wednesday, 22 May 2002.