



For immediate release – 7 September 2012

STATEMENT

Azerbaijan: International Organisations Condemn Deteriorating Freedom of Expression Situation

Baku, 7 September 2012. The International Partnership Group for Azerbaijan (IPGA), coordinated by ARTICLE 19, is deeply concerned by the deteriorating freedom of expression situation in Azerbaijan. Of specific concern is the threat of imminent closure for one of the most popular newspapers in the country, *Azadliq*. In addition, in recent weeks, another journalist was imprisoned on politically motivated charges, concerns surfaced regarding detention conditions for two other journalists, and a critical journalist who was previously attacked continued to experience harassment. Further, recent monitoring of Baku's newsstands showed that independent and opposition newspapers face growing distribution problems.

Threat of closure for Azadliq newspaper

Acting editor-in-chief of opposition *Azadliq* newspaper Rahim Hajiyev has reported that the newspaper faces imminent closure after receiving notice from the state-owned printing house that *Azadliq* must vacate its offices on the premises and would no longer be printed if *Azadliq* did not pay its debt of 25,000 AZN (approximately 20,000 GBP) by 3 September 2012. The paper was later given an extension until 10 September 2012. *Azadliq*'s debt to the printing house is for printing and utility costs, which the newspaper claims it cannot pay in part due to the inability of the GASID distribution company to pay its larger debt to *Azadliq*. *Azadliq* is one of the highest circulation newspapers and among the most critical media outlets in the country. It has faced severe difficulties in recent years due to state control of the advertising market and printing and distribution facilities, and hefty fines imposed as the result of numerous defamation cases. Many of its editors and reporters have been subjected to imprisonment or violent attacks.

Persecution of critical journalists

On 23 August 2012, freelance journalist **Faramaz Novruzoglu** joined the ranks of Azerbaijan's imprisoned journalists after a Baku court sentenced him to four and a half years in prison on charges of illegal border crossing and inciting public disorder. Novruzoglu believes the charges are connected with a series of articles he published exposing government corruption. He has previously served prison sentences in 2009 and 2007 in connection with his journalistic activities.

On 29 August 2012, a Baku court dismissed a case brought by *Tolishi Sedo* newspaper editor-in-chief **Hilal Mammadov** against the prison administration alleging that he was treated inhumanely in detention. Mammadov has been in detention since June 2012 and faces life in prison on charges of high treason and inciting hatred.

Khural newspaper editor-in-chief **Avaz Zeynalli** has recently reported a number of serious health problems which have worsened in detention, including kidney stones, radiculitis and chronic rhinitis. Zeynalli has been detained since October 2011, facing up to 12 years in prison on charges of extortion and failure to implement a court decision, based on a Member of Parliament's claims that Zeynalli attempted to blackmail her.

Journalist **Idrak Abbasov** reported continued acts of harassment against him and his family, as unknown assailants have attempted to break into his car outside his home three times over the past few weeks, most recently on 28 August 2012. Abbasov, a correspondent of the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) and *Ayna* and *Zerkalo* newspapers, was severely beaten to the point of hospitalisation in April 2012 by a group of State Oil Company of Azerbaijan (SOCAR) employees whilst filming their demolition of houses in his village. So far no one has been prosecuted for the attack.

Independent and opposition newspapers face growing distribution problems

Monitoring undertaken by a group of media workers and IRFS representatives on 1 September 2012 showed that many of Baku's newsstands do not carry newspapers or carry an insufficient quantity to meet demand. Some of the vendors interviewed reported that they received instructions stemming from an alleged order by an employee of the Baku Mayor's office to boycott the company GASID, which distributes independent and opposition newspapers such as *Ayna*, *Zerkalo*, *Yeni Musavat* and *Azadliq*. More than half of GASID's newsstands in Baku have been shut down over the past year as new kiosks selling sundries but not newspapers have been installed in their place, with support from the Baku Mayor's office.

The IPGA calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to take immediate steps to improve this alarming situation and to fulfill their international obligations to respect and protect the right to freedom of expression, including:

- Immediately cease proceedings to evict *Azadliq* newspaper from its offices in the state-owned printing house and allow the newspaper to continue to print whilst an agreement regarding the newspaper's debt is reached;
- Immediately and unconditionally release Hilal Mamamdov, Faramaz Novruzoglu, Avaz Zeynalli, and all other journalists currently detained or imprisoned in connection with exercising their right to free expression, and cease arresting persons for politically motivated reasons;
- Take immediate steps to improve detention conditions for Hilal Mammadov and Avaz Zeynalli, including promptly and impartially investigating reports of inhumane treatment of Mammadov and ensuring that Zeynalli receives immediate medical attention;
- Redouble efforts to investigate the attack against Idrak Abbasov and bring the perpetrators to justice, and investigate recent acts of harassment against him and put a stop to this continued pressure; and
- Cease support for a boycott of the GASID distribution company and create fair distribution conditions for all newspapers.

The following IPGA member organisations support this statement:

- ARTICLE 19
- Committee to Protect Journalists
- Freedom House
- Index on Censorship
- Media Diversity Institute
- Norwegian Helsinki Committee
- Reporters Without Borders

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- The International Partnership Group for Azerbaijan is a coalition of international organisations, coordinated by ARTICLE 19, working to promote and protect freedom of expression in Azerbaijan. For more information about the partnership, please visit www.azerbaijanfreeXpression.org or contact ARTICLE 19 at +44 (0) 20 7324 2500 or ipga@article19.org.