

REPRESSION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN AZERBAIJAN: THE SYMBOLIC CASE OF THE ATTEMPT TO SILENCE THE AZERBAIJAN HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSE SINCE 2 YEARS

***Baku and Oslo, 13 March 2013* – On 10 March 2011, the Azerbaijan Human Rights House was ordered to cease its activities by the authorities of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Since, Azerbaijani authorities have delayed to make an agreement and hence maintain the Azerbaijan Human Rights House closed.**

“The Azerbaijan Human Rights House is intended to support human rights defenders in Azerbaijan, be a joint facility to reach-out and hence increase the visibility of the work of human rights NGOs”, said the Executive Director of the Human Rights House Foundation Maria Dahle.

“By closing down the Human Rights House the authorities have closed the doors to any dialogue with civil society. Hence we call upon the government to re-open the House and end harassment against independent NGOs and human right defenders,” underlined Emin Huseynov, Director of the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety.

The Azerbaijan Human Rights House is one of the members of Human Rights House Network and served as an independent meeting place for human rights organizations until its closure. “The Azerbaijan Human Rights House provided human rights NGOs, human rights activists and youth organisations for a variety of forums, debates, exhibitions or press conferences. Closing it down is significantly limiting and hence narrow the possibilities to promote human rights,” said human rights lawyer and Homo Homini Award 2013 winner Intigam Aliyev, President of the Legal Education Society.

Pressure on international and national NGOs

“The closure of the Azerbaijan Human Rights House was in fact the starting-point of a well organised total pressure on human rights organisations and human rights defenders who voiced effectively against the growing number of human rights violation in Azerbaijan,” stated Rashid Hajili, Chairperson of the Media Rights Institute.

“The closure of the Azerbaijan Human Rights House and the refusal of registration of NGOs is only an illustration of broader restrictions on the right to freedom of association in Azerbaijan.” Maria Dahle added. “Ahead of the presidential elections in October 2013, the fact that civil society organisations in Azerbaijan remain closed or cannot get registered, is extremely worrying.”

The Election Monitoring Centre was closed down without any warnings by the authorities in April 2008, 3 months after its registration. The new established Election Monitoring Center the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre has been denied registration afterwards. On 19 February 2013, the appeal of the Human Rights Club against the Ministry of Justice’s decision to deny registration was rejected, on grounds that the organization did not specify the responsibilities of its lawful representative in the decision on the establishment of the organization.

Stricter State-control

The strict State-control over civil society in Azerbaijan has been intensified since July 2009, when legislative amendments aimed at requesting foreign non-governmental organisations or non-governmental organisations fully funded by foreign governmental sources to register on the basis of an agreement concluded with the State. On 16 March 2011, the government adopted a decree on rules governing registration of foreign NGOs and negotiations with them on required agreements, leaving the Ministry of Justice with a broad and discretionary power in interpreting and defining those agreements. Today, the Ministry of Justice can indeed close down an organization without notification, after two warnings has been issued to the respective NGO.

Additional limitations were introduced on 15 February 2013, which undermine the possibility to receive funding for unregistered NGOs, even small grants from domestic sources. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a resolution in January 2013 resolution on the The honouring of obligations and commitments by Azerbaijan calls upon Azerbaijan to review the law on NGOs with a view to addressing the concerns formulating by the Venice Commission and to improve and facilitate the registration procedures for international NGOs.

The Human Rights House Network members on 5 March 2013 called upon President Ilham Aliyev to allow the Human Rights House to reopen immediately and unconditionally.

For further information:

- HRHF's intervention on 5 March 2013 at the United Nations Human Rights Council on harassment of human rights defenders in Azerbaijan: <http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/19109.html>;
- Human Rights House Network letter of 5 March 2013 to President Ilham Aliyev on the restrictions to freedom of association, including the closure of the Azerbaijan Human Rights House: <http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/19106.html>;
- Human Rights House Network letter of 5 February 2013 to President Ilham Aliyev on the arrest of human rights defenders on 26 January 2013, including some of those who held a press conference at the Council of Europe on Wednesday 23 January 2013 and participated at the January 2013 session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: <http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/19045.html>;
- Information on the order received by the Azerbaijan Human Rights House to cease all its activities published on 11 March 2011: <http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/16060.html>;
- Information on the continued denial of the Azerbaijan Human Rights House to reopen published on 9 March 2012: <http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/17735.html>.

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About the Human Rights House Network (www.humanrightshouse.org)

The Human Rights House Network (HRHN) unites 87 human rights NGOs joining forces in independent Human Rights Houses in 16 countries in Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, East and Horn of Africa, and Western Europe. HRHN's aim is to protect, empower and support human rights organisations locally and unite them in an international network of Human Rights Houses.

The Human Rights House Foundation (HRHF), based in Oslo (Norway) with an office in Geneva (Switzerland), is HRHN's secretariat. HRHF is international partner of the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders and the emerging Balkan Network of Human Rights Defenders.

HRHF has consultative status with the United Nations and HRHN has participatory status with the Council of Europe.