



HUMAN RIGHTS HOUSE NETWORK

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30 April 2014

Persecution of human rights defender Leyla Yunus

Mr Minister, Mr Prosecutor General,

We, the undersigned members and partners of the Human Rights House Network (HRHN) and the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders, express our deep concern over the persecution and hindrance of free movement of human rights defender Leyla Yunus and her husband Arif Yunus. We call upon you to put an end to the attacks, detention and harassment of human rights defenders and to take steps in order to foster a safe environment for human rights defenders, in line with Azerbaijan's international obligations and commitments, including as a member of the Council of Europe.

On 28 April 2014 Leyla Yunus and her husband, the historian Arif Yunus, were prevented from leaving the country at Baku's airport. She then was detained and interrogated by the police regarding the case of the arrested journalist Rauf Mirkadirov and questioned about the relation between the journalist and the Institute for Peace and Democracy. She was released only in the after-noon on 29 April 2014. Searches were conducted in the office of the Institute for Peace and Democracy, and continued in the private home of Leyla Yunus until the night of 29 April 2014. According to Leila Yunus, she was humiliated during the search by the officers. The official grounds on which Leyla Yunus and Arif Yunus were prevented from leaving the country and detained are unclear, as well as the grounds on which the searches are being carried out.

Leader of the Institute for Peace and Democracy, Leyla Yunus is a well-known Azerbaijani human rights defender. Her NGO is a member of the South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders and has from the very start in 1995 worked on the issue to release political prisoners and to establish rule of law in Azerbaijan. Leyla Yunus has within several projects worked to establish dialogue between civil society actors in the South Caucasus. She is a Chevalier of the National Order of the Legion of Honour, as a tribute for her longstanding work promoting human rights.

We are worried that the persecution is related to her outspoken criticism in the past few days against the detention of Rauf Mirgadirov, the investigative journalist of the leading Russian-language newspaper Zerkalo (Mirror), who is now facing charges of treason for his efforts in the peace building process of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Rauf Mirkadirov participated in the numerous joint projects between the Institute for Peace and Democracy and Armenian NGOs.

Under Azerbaijan's commitments within the Organisation for Security and Cooperation's Misnk Group, we strongly believe that public diplomacy and cooperation between civil society in the South Caucasus contributes to efforts aiming at finding a peaceful solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

As the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe Nils Muižnieks stated on his Facebook page, “this is an additional example showing the extent of intimidation and repression of critical voices in Azerbaijan, a problem which I have repeatedly highlighted [...] and asked the Azerbaijani authorities to address.”¹ Azerbaijan should indeed guarantee the right to freedom of expression of all human rights defenders and critical voices, in line with its obligations as a member of the Council of Europe.

Furthermore, authorities should prevent the use of unreliable evidence and unwarranted investigations against human rights defenders, as laid out in the United Nations Human Rights Council resolution 22/6 of 21 March 2013.

We are extremely worried to see that human rights defenders, including journalists and bloggers, are persecuted, attacked and detained due to their work. In addition to Leyla Yunus, the Chairperson of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre (EMDS) Anar Mammadli, the Executive Director of EMDS Bashir Suleymanli and Elnur Mammadov, president of the Volunteers of International Cooperation, are facing court trials².

Ahead of the Chairmanship of the Council of Europe by the Republic of Azerbaijan, we call upon you to put an end to the crackdown of the civil society and to take steps in order to foster a safe environment for human rights defenders.

We further call upon you to report to the Council of Europe on your plans to investigate the acts of the State agents, which prevented Leyla Yunus and Arif Yunus from leaving the country and later detained them and to end all persecutions against them and other human rights defenders.

Sincerely,

Human Rights House Azerbaijan (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Azerbaijan Lawyers Association
- Institute for Reporters’ Safety and Freedom
- Legal Education Society
- Media Rights Institute
- Women Association for Rational Development

Belarusian Human Rights House in exile, Vilnius (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Belarusian PEN Centre
- Belarus Watch
- City Public Association "Centar Supolnaść"
- Human Rights Centre “Viasna”

Human Rights House Belgrade (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Belgrade Centre for Human Rights
- Lawyers Committee for Human Rights YUCOM
- Civic Initiatives
- Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia
- Policy Centre

Human Rights House Kiev (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Association of Ukrainian Human Rights Monitors on Law-Enforcement
- Human Rights Information Centre
- Center for Civil Liberties
- Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group

¹ Statement available at <https://www.facebook.com/HumanRightsHouseNetwork/posts/10152035306640965>.

² Further information on those cases available at <http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/20033.html>.

Free Word Centre London (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Article 19
- Vivarta
- Index on Censorship

Human Rights House Sarajevo (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Helsinki Committee for human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Human Rights House Tbilisi (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Georgian Centre for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Torture Victims - GCRT
- Caucasian Center for Human Rights and Conflict Studies
- Human Rights Centre
- Union Sapari
- Article 42 of the Constitution
- Media Institute

Human Rights House Oslo (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Health and Human Rights Info
- Human Rights House Foundation
- FIAN Norway

Human Rights House Voronezh (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Charitable Foundation
- Civic Initiatives Development Centre
- Confederation of Free Labor
- For Ecological and Social Justice
- Free University
- Golos
- Interregional Trade Union of Literary Men
- Lawyers for labor rights
- Memorial
- Ms. Olga Gnezdilova
- Soldiers Mothers of Russia
- Voronezh Journalist Club
- Voronezh-Chernozemie
- Youth Human Rights Movement

Human Rights House Yerevan (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- Armenian Helsinki Association
- Helsinki Citizens' Assembly-Vanadzor
- Journalists' Club "Asparez"
- Democracy Today

Human Rights House Zagreb (on behalf of the following NGOs):

- APEO/UPIM Association for Promotion of Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities
- B.a.B.e.
- CMS - Centre for Peace Studies
- Documenta - Centre for Dealing with the Past
- GOLJP - Civic Committee for Human Rights
- Svitanje - Association for Protection and Promotion of Mental Health

Rafto Foundation, Norway

Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Poland

Public Union of Democracy Human Rights Resource Centre, Azerbaijan

Legal Protection and Awareness Society, Azerbaijan

Copies have been sent to:

- Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Azerbaijan
- Presidency of the French Republic
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the French Republic
- Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe
- Private Office of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe
- Chairman of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe
- Delegation of the Council of Europe in Azerbaijan
- UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders
- Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE ODIHR)
- Delegation of the European Union in Azerbaijan
- Subcommittee on Human Rights of the European Parliament
- Diplomatic community in Baku, Brussels, Geneva and Strasbourg
- Various ministries of foreign affairs and parliamentary committees on foreign affairs

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

The Human Rights House Network (HRHN) unites 90 human rights NGOs joining forces in 18 independent Human Rights Houses in 13 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 Azerbaijan is one of the members of HRHN and served as an independent meeting place, a resource centre, and a coordinator for human rights organisations in Azerbaijan. In 2010, 6'000 human rights defenders, youth activists, independent journalists, and lawyers, used the facilities of the Human Rights House Azerbaijan, which has become a focal point for promotion and protection of human rights in Azerbaijan. The Human Rights House Azerbaijan has been closed after the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Azerbaijan ordered all activities to be been ceased on 10 March 2011.

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 Balkan Network of Human Rights Defenders.

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