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**HUMAN RIGHTS CENTER OF AZERBAIJAN**  
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The role of civil society in the protection of human rights

Dear ladies and gentlemen:

In the context of our discussion on the role of civil society in the protection of human rights, I would like to attract your attention to the disastrous situation of Azerbaijani non-governmental organizations, criticizing the policy of our Government. In December-February, the legislation on NGO and grants was dramatically changed. Consequently, the criminal proceedings were started against about 20 NGOs, and seven NGO activists were arrested. It is necessary to note that all NGOs under the pressure are the grantees of various American foundations, and have been listed as "traitors of national interests" in the pro-governmental media last year.

With full respect to the announced purpose of law amendments to increase a transparency of the financial activities of civil society, it is obvious that instead of healthy development of NGO sector, it is now de facto paralyzed. The registration of incoming foreign grants is stopped, some NGO bank assets are frozen, the donors are suspended the provision of grants to the Azerbaijan applicants. Moreover, the process of drafting of vital amendments to NGO and grant law is not enough transparent itself. The law drafts are not discussed widely with NGOs and/or examined by the Venice Commission.

In the most terrible situation are my colleagues who had been arrested. There is a full consensus among my colleagues including Amnesty International that these prisoners are political. Someone can say that it is prematurely to judge about political motivation and quality of evidences in these cases until the final judgments. But the criminal procedure law includes a number of alternative measures of restriction, not related to detention. For example, unclear why was necessary to imprison Mr. Intiqam Aliyev, a head of the Legal Enlightenment Society, who represents before the European Court of Human Rights the applicants on over 20 already communicated cases, and what was a need for seizure of about 100 application files with confidential documents? Now, the rights of dozens applicants to Strasbourg court are endangered. Why was arrested Mr. Rasul Jafarov, a head of the Human Rights Club, who returned to Azerbaijan from abroad when he has learned about started criminal persecution and actively cooperated with investigation?

I would like to add that two imprisoned human rights defenders who still insist on own innocence were forced to write from the prison the letters demanding to exclude them from the lists of political prisoners. One more activist after a start of criminal persecution against him dissolved his NGO and returned to the applicants the files of 10 cases prepared for the European Court.

Our civil society needs an OSCE assessment of compliance of the current situation with obligations of Azerbaijan in the field of human dimension. I also hope that situation of NGOs and issue of political prisoners would be discussed during the dialogue of NGOs with Government, and ask the OSCE and other intergovernmental organizations to facilitate this process and to contribute to it.

Thank you for attention.

Eldar Zeynalov.