



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Media Freedom in Azerbaijan

As delivered by Deputy Chief of Mission Kyle Scott
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 10, 2007

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Only two weeks ago in the Permanent Council, the United States voiced its concern about governmental actions detrimental to media freedom in Azerbaijan. Then, it was a series of cases imposing harsh penalties for alleged libel and defamation. Today, we note with continued concern another instance of journalists jailed for exercising their rights.

On May 4th, only one day after World Press Freedom Day, a court sentenced two journalists to three and four years imprisonment, respectively, for an essay on religion which was found to be an incitement to national, racial and religious hatred.

Mr. Chairman, let me be clear: The United States is not endorsing the views expressed in the controversial article, but we do believe that the citizens of every OSCE country have the right to freely express their opinions. The governments of all our 56 participating states have affirmed such a right by their acceptance of OSCE commitments to media freedom.

The OSCE's Representative on Freedom of the Media characterized these verdicts as a serious violation of Azerbaijan's OSCE commitments obliging it to guarantee a free flow of information and freedom of expression. We agree with his assessment, as well as his call on the authorities in Azerbaijan to free the jailed journalists and also his warning that such treatment of journalists risks sending a message of empowerment to violent extremists. It is for governments to lead and help form public opinion in defending the rights of all citizens.

As a friend and partner of Azerbaijan, the United States remains committed to working with the Azerbaijani government and the Azerbaijani people to support their efforts to achieve the goal of Azerbaijan's development as a strong democracy. In this regard, we are pleased at the recent opening of the Azerbaijan-American Academy of Journalism. This new academy will provide training to help journalists develop the highest standards of ethics, objectivity and professionalism, and will help the press develop as a strong institution in Azerbaijan's new democracy. We hope that the government, Azerbaijan's Press Council, and civil society can come together to protect media freedom, raise journalistic standards, and help Azerbaijan realize its great potential. Releasing jailed journalists would be one very important positive step forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.