

24 September 2007
Baku city, Azerbaijan

S T A T E M E N T
on the deteriorating situation with the Freedom of Expression in Azerbaijan

Adopted by the Group of Human Rights NGOs,
members of the branch of Human Rights House Foundation in Azerbaijan Republic

The situation with media in Azerbaijan became considerably deteriorated since 2003 Presidential elections. As opposition is split and does not pose any danger to the ruling regime, the authorities mobilize all efforts to silence and destroy the outspoken media. There is a growing environment of state hostility toward independent and opposition media that raises serious concern about the security of independent journalists in Azerbaijan. The government continues to use an arsenal of questionable methods—including defamation laws, heavy fines, cumbersome regulations, and selective government subsidies—to quash all public criticism.

Azerbaijan currently has the highest number of arrested journalists among all of the 56 member states of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It was stated by Miklos Haraszti, the organization's special representative for media freedoms, during his visit to Baku in April 2007. As if to underline that status, the Paris-based media rights watchdog Reporters Without Borders a while ago included the Azerbaijani leader on its list of so-called "Media Predators."

Azerbaijan is the contracting space for freedom of expression, reveals a pattern of infringement on the rights of members of civil society, and in particular journalists, to freedom of expression. The Azerbaijani government pressures opposition and independent media outlets by limiting their access to printing presses and distribution networks, initiating defamation cases resulting in the imposition of crippling fines, restricting access to official information, and harassing journalists. The newspapers with critical standpoint to the government end up closing their newspaper and stopping their activity. During the last decade the authorities in Azerbaijan have also shut down 3 privately-owned television channels.

In addition, journalists striving to expose the misuse of government power are increasingly living under the threat of politically motivated arrests, physical assault and even murder. There are dozens of bright cases of pressure on journalists, demonstrating government's political will to suppress the media. For example, on the 2nd of March 2005 the editor in-chief of *Monitor* magazine Elmar Huseynov was shot to death in the entrance of his apartment. On November 24, 2006, police evicted *Azadlig*, an opposition paper, together with the newspaper *Bizim Yol* and Turan News Agency, from the state-owned building where they had their offices in the center of Baku. In May 2007 the authorities closed down the joint office of two independent newspapers- *Gundelik Azerbaijan* and *Realniy Azerbaijan*, which had the highest circulation in the country. Its chief editor was arrested on groundless charges. As a matter of fact, none of the investigations into these physical assaults has yielded a conviction, contributing to a climate of impunity for such attacks.

Thus, independent and foreign media are the only existing means where alternative opinion can be expressed. With presidential elections coming in 2008, the authorities are going to increase their attempts to stifle independent media so that no critical voice is heard.

A plurality of political views is not available to the public and opposition activists have no access to those broadcasting media. All the TV channels are under the government influence. Media monitoring carried out by independent and international monitors in most of the previous pre-election campaigns showed that the content of all the state-run and private television stations' news broadcasts were biased and overwhelmingly pro-governmental, with the exception of private ANS TV. Even the new Public TV (ITV) obviously lacks independence and impartiality, although was created as an obligation before Council of Europe to help break the state's

control of the media, promote pluralism, and help bridge divisions between pro-government and pro-opposition press.

The Azerbaijani authorities have an obligation to uphold commitments to a healthy environment for the free dissemination of information and exchange of opinions, including those alleging official wrongdoing and abuse of public office. Government officials in Azerbaijan must understand that it is a legitimate function of the media to put their activities under public scrutiny and that such scrutiny must not lead to violence against journalists.

We, the undersigned Azerbaijani human rights NGOs call on the international community, particularly OSCE structures to press the Azerbaijani government to ensure the prompt and conclusive investigation of the case of murdered chief–editor Elmar Huseynov and assaults on journalists, to institute measures to tackle institutionalized impunity for harassment of journalists by law enforcement officials, to end the use of criminal defamation suits as a means to silence dissent and to ensure that due process is observed in the enforcement of media industry standards.

Sincerely,

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