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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Azerbaijan Elections

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
October 6, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman, in one month, the people of Azerbaijan elect a new Parliament. The United States is following the election campaign with great interest and concern. We support the Government in its determination to hold free and fair elections. We support the people of Azerbaijan, who are determined to participate in such elections.

Freedom of assembly is a basic right and an important part of any democratic election. We are pleased to note that on September 12th, the OSCE Office in Baku conducted a seminar for participants from government and non-governmental groups on guidelines and procedures to facilitate freedom of assembly. We are encouraged by such examples of dialogue and had hoped the seminar would lead to increased peaceful freedom of assembly.

Mr. Chairman, in the weeks following the seminar, the opposition Azadliq bloc attempted to hold two rallies in central Baku. Both sides worked to avert a serious clash on September 25 by agreeing to negotiate for new rally sites, in addition to those sites already authorized by the Government.

Unfortunately, these negotiations failed. On October 1, the Azadliq bloc attempted to hold an unsanctioned rally in central Baku. The authorities, sometimes using violence, prevented it by deploying a heavy police presence throughout Baku, detaining or dispersing opposition activists who tried to assemble. We regret the failure of the negotiations and are particularly troubled by the Government of Azerbaijan's unwillingness to allow freedom of assembly. It is a troubling step back from the progress we welcomed in other parts of the electoral process up to now.

Mr. Chairman, in the remaining four weeks before the election, the United States Government encourages both sides to return to the negotiating table and to re-dedicate themselves to the letter and spirit of "freedom of assembly." We urge the authorities to take the lead in finding the compromises that allow full exercise of this basic right.

Continued dialogue -- between the Government of Azerbaijan, the opposition parties, and independent candidates -- is an important tool to improve the election climate. We encourage dialogue as a way to resolve other issues that will likely arise in the final four weeks of campaigning. We repeat our call on all participants in Azerbaijan's election process to continue working for free and fair elections that will meet international standards.

Thank you.