



January 20, 2015

Chancellor Dr. Angela Merkel
Bundeskanzleramt
Willy-Brandt-Straße 1
10557 Berlin

Dear Chancellor Dr. Merkel,

As members of the international NGO coalition ‘Sport for Rights’ we are appealing to you to make human rights a central subject in your meeting tomorrow with president Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan. We are writing to urge you to use this crucial opportunity to demand the immediate release of prominent human rights defenders, whom the Azerbaijani authorities have thrown behind bars in past months amid an escalating crackdown on civil society. The charges against them are blatantly politically motivated, and your voice is badly needed to secure their freedom.

In recent years, space for political activity and for civil society and journalism in Azerbaijan has gradually been curtailed, and the last six months in particular have witnessed a severe and unprecedented crackdown, with dozens of civil society activists and journalists serving or awaiting sentencing. The country’s most prominent investigative journalist and a number of leading human rights defenders are in prison, punished for their criticism of government policies. Sham charges such as ‘tax evasion’, ‘high treason’ are used to justify the criminalization of fundamental rights and freedoms. Many human rights groups have ceased their activities, while dozens of activists either left the country or went into hiding as the crackdown mounted since summer.

The ‘Sport for Rights’ coalition has been established to raise this issue in the context of the forthcoming international sporting events to be hosted by Azerbaijan. Against a backdrop of systematic state-sponsored repression, these events will fail to reflect the spirit in which they were established. The next major sporting event is the Baku European Games, designed and regulated by the European Olympic Committees, scheduled for June 2015. A policy shift by the Azerbaijan towards an open society is urgently required if these Games are to be a success. Human rights defenders and journalists must be released, and we urge you to emphasize this point in your conversations with President Aliyev.

This issue is all the more important given that Azerbaijan is a member of the European community of nations: the country is a member of the Council of Europe (CoE), and part of the EU’s Eastern Partnership Initiative. By ratifying the European Human Rights Convention, Azerbaijan has made a commitment under international law to respect the fundamental freedoms contained therein. CoE officials have repeatedly called attention to Azerbaijan’s failure to uphold these freedoms for its

citizens. In his retrospective on 2014, Nils Muiznieks, the CoE Human Rights Commissioner, declared:

One of the most difficult situations I have observed is in Azerbaijan, where the authorities are engaging in a systematic crackdown on human rights defenders, media professionals and civil society partners of the Council of Europe. The number of those in detention there or in exile continues to grow.

President Aliyev may point to token releases that take place from time to time – but please remember that not only are these rare, they are issued only after innocent people have served time in prison, losing months and years of their lives for exercising their basic rights to freedom of expression and association. The authorities brought or threatened blatantly bogus criminal charges against dozens of independent and opposition political activists, journalists, bloggers, and human rights defenders, who remain behind bars.

Among those unjustly arrested or convicted in 2014 are:

- **Anar Mammadli and Bashir Suleymanli**, co-founders of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Centre -Mammadli and Suleymanli were sentenced to 5.5 and 3.5 years respectively in May 2014, following outspoken criticism of Azerbaijan's presidential elections in October 2013. They were charged with treason, tax evasion, and illegal entrepreneurship. On 29 September 2014, Mammadli was awarded the Václav Havel Award for Human Rights by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.
- **Leyla Yunus**, Director of the Azerbaijan Institute of Peace and Democracy– Yunus was arrested on 30 July 2014, and has remained in pre-trial detention since then, despite serious concerns about her health. Yunus is a Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor. The European Parliament included Yunus as one of three shortlisted candidates for the 2014 Sakharov Prize, which goes to the world's top human rights defenders, in recognition of her outstanding activism. She was also awarded the 2013 Theodore Hecker Award in Esslingen-am-Neckar "for her self-sacrificing contribution to the protection of human rights and civil freedoms in Azerbaijan." Her husband Arif Yunus, Head of the Department of Conflict and Migration Institute of Peace and Democracy in Azerbaijan, Ph.D., a historian specializing in conflict studies, was arrested on 5 August 2014. They are charged with economic crimes and treason, for which they face a maximum 20-year prison term.
- **Rasul Jafarov**, human rights defender, the coordinator of the "Sing for Democracy" (2012) and "Art for Democracy" (2013) campaigns– Jafarov was arrested on 2 August 2014 and has remained in detention since. His trial began on 15 January 2015. He is charged with spurious charges of treason, tax evasion, and illegal entrepreneurship.
- **Intigam Aliyev**, human rights defender, lawyer, chairman of Legal Education Society– Aliyev has been in detention since his arrest on 8 August 2014 on several charges including tax evasion. On the same day, his office was also raided and closed down by the authorities. In his capacity as a lawyer he has specialized in defending rights of citizens in the European Court of Human Rights. At the time of his arrest, he was dealing with over 100 cases pending before the Court.

- **Khadija Ismayilova**, investigative journalist; radio host for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Azerbaijani service; member of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project– Ismayilova was arrested on 5 December 2014 on the trumped up charges of driving a man into suicide. Ismayilova is famous for her extensive reporting on government corruption, including exposing the business interests of the ruling family. She has long faced retaliations for her journalism and outspokenness on corruption and human rights violations. She faced the government-orchestrated smear campaign in 2012 when a video appeared online containing intimate and illegally obtained images of her.

We ask you to unequivocally remind Azerbaijan of its responsibilities under the European Convention on Human Rights and to make clear to President Aliyev that the government of Germany is appalled by the imprisonment of human rights defenders and that Azerbaijan's relationship with Germany cannot be business as usual as long as these wrongfully imprisoned activists remain behind bars. Azerbaijan's partners should insist that this terrible situation in the country's human rights record is removed before Baku plays host to the European Games, and that these people be released immediately and unconditionally. We sincerely hope that we can count on your principled leadership on this urgent matter. We thank you for your attention to the concerns set forth herein, and wish you a successful and productive meeting.

Sincerely,

NGO coalition "Sport for Rights", including:

1. Centre for Civil Liberties (Ukraine)
2. Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Poland)
3. Index on Censorship (Great Britain)
4. International Partnership for Human Rights (Belgium)
5. Netherlands Helsinki Committee (The Netherlands)
6. Norwegian Helsinki Committee (Norway)
7. People in Need (Czech Republic)
8. Platform (Great Britain)
9. Youaid Foundation (Poland)
10. A group of civil society activists from Azerbaijan who wish to remain anonymous out of concern for the security of their family members