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Azerbaijan: Abysmal record of human rights continues as activist arrested

The persecution of human rights activists continues unabated in Azerbaijan, in spite of the obligations the country committed to as a member of Council of Europe and currently a chair of its decision making body, the Committee of Ministers, Amnesty International said today.

The latest human rights defender to be targeted by the Azerbaijani authorities is Leyla Yunus who was detained today on her way to a press conference in the capital Baku. Her husband Arif Yunus was also briefly detained while visiting her in the Baku prosecutor's office.

"Leyla Yunus is yet another independent voice in Azerbaijan who, for a long time, the government has tried to silence through threats and intimidation. Failing to achieve this they have now resorted to trumped up charges and detention in order to punish her for criticising the government," said Natalia Nozadze, Amnesty International's researcher on Azerbaijan.

Later, the a court in Baku placed Leyla Yunus under a three-month pre-trial detention and Arif Yunus with travel restrictions. According to media reports, authorities charged Leyla and Arif Yunus with treason and other charges related to fraud and tax evasion.

Amnesty International believes that the treason charges against Leyla and Arif Yunus are trumped up and are part of a process of on-going harassment against them in connection with Leyla Yunus's activism.

Leyla Yunus organized a press conference last week in order to call for a boycott of the first European Games - to be held in Baku in 2015 – in recognition of the regime's dire human rights record.

Prior to today's detention, she had regularly been summoned to the prosecutor's office and interrogated in connection with criminal proceedings against an independent Azerbaijani journalist Rauf Mirgadirov, who had been arrested on what appear to be trumped-up charges of spying for Armenia. She had repeatedly refused to answer police questions unless her passport, which was confiscated on 28 April 2014 along with her husband's passport, was returned.

"Today's detention is yet another example of the unrelenting suppression of critical voices that is a regular feature of life in the country. Members of the Council of Europe must challenge the Azerbaijani authorities for flouting the principles of the human rights body which Azerbaijan is chairing at the moment," said Natalia Nozadze.

The list of human rights violations regularly perpetrated by the Azerbaijani authorities is long and includes clamping down on the right to freedom of expression, assembly and association including persecution of activists, arresting them on trumped up charges and denying them the right to a fair trial. Amnesty International currently counts at least 19 prisoners of conscience behind bars solely for peacefully expressing their views.

Background:

Persons in civilian clothing stopped Leyla Yunus's car en route to the press conference this morning and forced the driver to change course.

Her family and the lawyer did not know her whereabouts for several hours until the Office of the Prosecutor General called Leyla Yunus's husband, Arif Yunus, notifying him that she had been detained.