



For immediate release – 10 March 2011

STATEMENT

Azerbaijan: Youth Activists Targeted as Freedom of Expression Clampdown Continues

Member organisations of the International Partnership Group for Azerbaijan condemn the recent wave of arrests of youth activists and bloggers in connection with planned pro-democracy protests in the country, and call for their immediate release. Reports of restrictions on freedom of expression and pressure by the Azerbaijani authorities have escalated in recent weeks, as calls for pro-democracy protests – inspired by the events in the Middle East and North Africa – have gained momentum in the country.

The undersigned organisations are calling on the Azerbaijani authorities to immediately and unconditionally release the five youth activists currently being detained and to cease restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of assembly.

The detained youth activists are:

- **Jabbar Savalan**, an opposition political activist who was arrested on 5 February 2011 after posting on Facebook calls for pro-democracy protests. He was charged with possessing drugs with intent to resell after police allegedly found 0.74 grams of marijuana in his pocket. Savalan has no history of drug use or drug possession, and his supporters claim the marijuana was planted. He remains in pre-trial detention and faces up to three years of imprisonment.
- **Bakhtiyar Hajiyev**, a blogger and civic activist involved in organising the planned 11 March 2011 mass protest, who was arrested on 4 March 2011 on charges of evading military service. Although military service is compulsory, the Azerbaijani Constitution provides for alternative military service, which Hajiyev has requested. In a letter sent from detention in the city of Ganja, Hajiyev reported being beaten and threatened with rape by police. He remains in pre-trial detention and faces up to two years of imprisonment.
- **Dayanat Babayev**, an opposition political activist, who was arrested on 4 March 2011 whilst talking on his mobile phone in public. He was given an administrative sentence of 10 days' detention for "violating public order". Babayev, who was held incommunicado for two days, reported that police told

him his detention was connected with the planned 12 March 2011 opposition protest.

- Youth activist **Rashadat Akhundov** and opposition political activist **Sakhavat Soltanli**, who were both arrested on 8 March 2011. Akhundov was charged with defying police orders, and Soltanli was charged with “auto hooliganism”, for which they were each sentenced to five days of detention. Both maintain that the charges are false.

These arrests took place against a broader backdrop of intimidation, harassment, violence, and imprisonment of individuals who express opinions critical of the Azerbaijani authorities. In addition to the arrests, police have recently shut down three non-governmental organisations in the city of Ganja and detained and questioned employees of the Baku-based Institute for Reporters’ Freedom and Safety. A number of online activists have reported being harassed and questioned by police in connection with their Facebook activities.

The Azerbaijani authorities are bound by international law to respect and protect the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, which are fundamental to democratic society. The undersigned organisations call on the Azerbaijani authorities to immediately and unconditionally release the detained youth activists and to cease practices which restrict freedom of expression and freedom of assembly.

The following organisations support this statement:

- ARTICLE 19: Global Campaign for Free Expression
- Freedom House
- Human Rights House Foundation
- Index on Censorship
- Media Diversity Institute
- Norwegian Helsinki Committee
- Reporters Without Borders

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- The International Partnership Group for Azerbaijan is a coalition of 20 international NGOs working to promote and protect freedom of expression in Azerbaijan. For more information about the Partnership, please contact Rebecca Vincent at +44 (0)207 324 2500 or rebecca@article19.org.