



## House Foreign Affairs Committee

### Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing on Human Rights in Azerbaijan Since the COP29 UN Climate Change Conference

April 29, 2025<sup>1</sup> – 10:30 a.m. 2360 Rayburn House Office Building

#### Statement Submitted by Amnesty International USA

##### *Introduction*

Amnesty International USA is pleased to submit the following statement on human rights in Azerbaijan since the COP29 UN Climate Change Conference. This statement is adapted in part from Amnesty International's latest annual report, [The State of the World's Human Rights](#), which covers 2024, and other [research and reports](#) focused on human rights, including the rights to freedom of expression and association, in Azerbaijan in the months following COP29 in the fall of 2024. **It is critical that Congress speak out on the increasing repression taking place inside Azerbaijan and on behalf of the hundreds of members of civil society who have been imprisoned or otherwise targeted by President Ilham Aliyev's government.**

##### *Crackdowns around COP29*

In November 2024, Azerbaijan hosted COP29 amid allegations that senior officials from its conference team were using the opportunity to broker new fossil fuel deals. The Host Country Agreement between Azerbaijan and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's Executive Secretary was never made public, although a leaked version indicated a lack of genuine protection for human rights. **Since Azerbaijan was announced as the COP29 host in December 2023, the authorities have engaged in an intensified crackdown on civil society**, similar to previous crackdowns documented by Amnesty International around other major international events hosted by Azerbaijan, including [Eurovision 2012](#) and the [European Games 2015](#).

Independent Azerbaijani voices were missing from COP29, with many activists and journalists either behind bars or in exile. The few who were granted official entry to COP29 told Amnesty International that they were afraid to speak on the conference site out of fear of reprisals. **Amnesty International sought, but was not granted, access to imprisoned activists and journalists while its delegates were in Azerbaijan.** This included the denial of access to the

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<sup>1</sup> Factual updates to this testimony were made up to one week after the date of the hearing.

court building after requesting permission to attend the remand hearing of human rights defender Anar Mammadli on November 20, 2024 (discussed below).

### ***Freedom of Expression and Association***

Independent NGOs and the media continued to face arbitrary restrictions, including denial of registration and onerous reporting requirements. **The media sector remained under effective government control, resulting in widespread self-censorship. The February 2024 presidential election and COP29 were preceded by new waves of arrests of independent journalists and other government critics.**

In April of 2024, human rights defender [Anar Mammadli](#), winner of the 2014 PACE human rights prize, was arrested and placed in pretrial detention on fabricated smuggling charges. His arrest came shortly after his Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center published an assessment on the conduct of the presidential election and as he, together with other human rights defenders, announced a coalition on climate justice ahead of COP29. **Tuesday, April 29, 2025, marked one year since Mammadli was arrested. He remains in pre-trial detention.**

More than 20 journalists remain in arbitrary detention. On March 6, 2024, police raided one of the last remaining independent news channels [Toplum TV](#), its partner organization the Institute of Democratic Initiatives (IDI), and the Platform for the Third Republic, an opposition group. They detained journalists and activists including Toplum TV founder Alasgar Mammadli, journalist Mushûg Jabbar, Third Republic board members Akif Gurbanov and Ruslan Izzetli, and IDI activists Ramil Babayev and Ali Zeynalov, all on fabricated charges. Independent journalists Imran Aliyev and Farid Mehralizade, arrested on April 18 and May 29 of 2024 respectively, also remained in detention on false charges of currency smuggling.

Between August and November of 2024, the prosecution brought new fabricated charges of illegal entrepreneurship, money laundering and tax evasion against journalists of the investigative outlet [Abzas Media](#), who had been held in arbitrary detention since November 2023. Its director and his deputy Ulvi Hasanli and Mahammad Kekalov, editor-in-chief Sevinj Vagifgizi and journalists Nargiz Absalamova, Elnara Gasimova and Hafiz Babali faced between eight and 12 years' imprisonment if convicted. The trial is ongoing. The court has not investigated the complaints about inhuman treatment and physical attacks several of the journalists have faced in detention.

On December 6, 2024, six journalists from Meydan TV and the deputy director of the Baku Journalism School were detained on currency smuggling charges. They are reporters Aynur Ganbarova, Aytaj Ahmadova, Khayala Agayeva, Natig Javadli, Ramin Jabrayilzade and Aysel Umudova. Another MeydanTV journalist, Shamshad Agha (Aghayev) was arrested on February 5, 2025. They face up to eight years in prison. The journalists have complained of ill-treatment in detention. On April 2, 2025, their pre-trial detention was extended by another three months. During the April 2 hearing, both the journalists and their lawyers stressed that the request for

an extension of the pre-trial detention was groundless and demanded that it not be granted. The journalists considered the accusation of smuggling to be slander and said that MeydanTV was being punished for its activities exposing government corruption.

In July and August of 2024, academics Iqbal Abilov and Bahruz Samadov were arrested on fabricated charges of treason. They remained in pre-trial custody. While in custody, visits and communication with their families have been restricted. On May 2, 2025, the prosecutor asked for 19 years imprisonment for Abilov, who has advocated for the rights of national minorities in Azerbaijan. Authorities have rejected the petition to transfer Samadov to house arrest.

[Tofig Yagublu](#), a prominent opposition figure, former journalist, and outspoken government critic, was arrested on December 14, 2023. He remained in detention throughout 2024, with his trial beginning in June of 2024, and was sentenced on March 10, 2025, to nine years in prison on charges of fraud and document forgery in a judicial process that was widely condemned for its lack of due process. **Yagublu began a hunger strike on April 1, and remains on strike as of this writing, his health rapidly deteriorating.** Yagublu has stated: “I know this hunger strike will be the end of my life, but I choose to die for my freedom. I demand the freedom I have a right to. Either freedom or death!” Yagublu’s lawyers have filed a petition with the Court of Appeals to have him placed under house arrest due to his health, but there has been no response yet.

[Rufat Safarov](#), a prominent human rights defender, was **detained on the evening of December 3, 2024, while he was preparing to travel to the United States to receive the Secretary of State’s Human Rights Defender Award.** He was charged with “fraud involving significant damage” and “hooliganism”. If convicted, he faces up to 10 years in prison. He was previously imprisoned for nine years in 2015 on apparent trumped-up charges after he made a public statement criticizing the government. An investigator at the Prosecutor’s Office of Zardab district at the time, he then resigned from his position and joined the opposition. He was pardoned and released in 2019.

Farid Mehralizada, an economist and journalist for RFE/RL’s Radio Azadliq, has been in pre-trial detention since May 2024 on trumped-up charges including currency smuggling, tax evasion and document forgery related to the case against the Abzas media journalists. According to Mehralizada, he has never worked for Abzas media. If convicted, he faces up to 12 years in prison. His trial is ongoing. Mehralizada has a six-month-old daughter, born while he was in detention. His lawyer’s requests for a transfer to house arrest, to be reunited with his family and daughter, have not been granted. Mehralizada said in court on December 28, 2024: “I have not committed any violation that would be covered by any article in the Criminal Code. But there is also an unofficial Criminal Code in Azerbaijan, and freedom of speech is considered a crime there. I committed that crime.”

In February 2025, Aziz Orujov, editor of independent broadcaster Kanal 13, was sentenced to two years in prison on illegal construction charges. His family members report that Aziz suffers

from heart conditions, high blood pressure and neurological issues. Kanal 13 regularly covers human rights issues and gives space to opposition views. In 2017, Orujov was jailed for a year in reprisal for the outlet's work.

As of January 2025, Azerbaijani human rights defenders estimated that **approximately 300 people remained in pre-trial detention**, or were imprisoned following grossly unfair trials, on politically motivated charges.

**Jailed government critics continue to be denied adequate medical care, resulting in significant worsening of their health.** They included Anar Mammadli, Alasgar Mammadli, Ruslan Izzetli, Aziz Orujov, Fazil Gasimov and Famil Khalilov. On April 22, 2024, academic [Gubad Ibadoghlu](#), who had been held in pretrial detention for 274 days, was moved to house arrest as his health deteriorated. He remained under investigation on false charges and was banned from leaving Azerbaijan to receive medical care.

### ***Recommendations***

Congress should:

- Urge the Trump administration to **raise human rights in all diplomatic interactions** with the Azerbaijan government and emphasize the need to end the clampdown on civil society and peaceful dissent, and **release from prison** all human rights defenders, activists, journalists, and government critics who have been arbitrarily arrested or imprisoned under false, politically motivated charges.
- Call on the Azerbaijan government to **repeal laws that infringe on press freedoms and freedom of expression** by unduly restricting media or NGOs.
- Highlight individual cases like those discussed above, and also highlight the government's obligation to **respect the right to fair trial for the more than 300 prisoners** alleged to have been targeted for their opposition to government policies or other reasons in violation of their human rights.
- Fully fund and call on the State Department to **devote resources towards prison visits and court observation** to promote transparency and pressure Azerbaijani authorities to uphold the right to a fair trial and to combat torture and other ill-treatment.

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