



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Human Rights Concerns in Azerbaijan

As delivered by Political Counselor Casey Christensen
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
January 28, 2010

The United States is concerned by recent charges of drug possession filed against imprisoned Azerbaijani journalist Eynulla Fatullayev.

Eynulla Fatullayev is currently serving an eight and a half year prison term for two different articles he wrote and for which he was accused of libel, terrorism, tax evasion, and inciting ethnic hatred. A number of reputable domestic and international observers consider his imprisonment politically motivated.

The OSCE's Representative on Freedom of Media has called the recent allegations of heroin smuggling or possession highly improbable, particularly under the circumstances of his incarceration. In addition, the timing of the charges, coming before an expected judgment by the European Court of Human Rights on a case brought by Mr. Fatullayev, creates concern. We urge the Government of Azerbaijan to resolve this case in accordance with the country's laws and Constitution, as well as its international commitments. Securing freedom of expression for all citizens, including members of the media, is essential for democracy. Without an open media environment, candidates in the upcoming parliamentary election will not be able to effectively disseminate their messages the public, undermining the credibility of the government's stated commitment to democratic development.

We call upon the government of Azerbaijan to resolve this and other cases of imprisoned journalists and to promote a free and independent media, in keeping with its professed goal of developing democratic institutions and a vibrant and free society in Azerbaijan. Releasing those members of the media who have been unjustly imprisoned, including Eynulla Fatullayev, would be a good step in this direction.

In another case involving freedom of expression, we also urge Azerbaijani authorities to conduct the appeal of imprisoned youth activists and bloggers Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizade in a fair and transparent manner. Following their convictions in November, we voiced our regret over the court's decision and our concern with the non-transparent investigation, closed court hearings, and disproportionate legal charges. We urge Azerbaijan to guarantee that the due process rights of Milli and Hajizade are fully protected during the appeal process.

The United States remains committed to working together with the government and people of Azerbaijan to encourage freedom of expression and rule of law based on principles of justice OSCE commitments which we view as integral to the democratic process in every State.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.