



**PERMANENT DELEGATION
OF NORWAY TO THE OSCE**

As delivered by Ambassador Guttorm Vik

to the Permanent Council, Vienna

March 17, 2011

STATEMENT ON THE ARREST OF YOUTH ACTIVISTS IN AZERBAIJAN

Mr. Chairperson,

Like previous speakers, we continue to follow with concern developments in Azerbaijan. Friday and Saturday last week, opposition forces attempted to hold political rallies in Baku, which were in effect thwarted by police. Although freedom of assembly and speech are guaranteed by the Azerbaijani constitution, and part of the country's OSCE and Council of Europe commitments, reports and complaints about breaches of these fundamental rights still occur all too frequently. We call upon Azerbaijani authorities to take such allegations seriously and address their root causes. Engaging in a constructive dialogue in good faith with the opposition, to ensure that their legitimate demands for venues for public rallies are met, would be an important first step.

Actions taken in the lead-up to the political demonstrations and in their aftermath are also arousing serious concern. Arrests of youth activists made in the days ahead of the protests inevitably raise questions whether these were of a pre-emptive nature. Likewise, reports about hastily organized court cases, held late at night and where defendants have allegedly been deprived of basic rights, such as the right to be represented by a lawyer of one's own choice, can only serve to strengthen our concern. We encourage Azerbaijani authorities to ensure that these cases are treated

carefully and with the utmost attention to transparency and public scrutiny, so as not to further political polarization and suspicion.

Last week, in official letters from the Ministry of Justice, the Azerbaijani Government has effectively ordered some international NGOs to cease their activities in Azerbaijan. We call upon Azerbaijani authorities not to let the new NGO legislation serve as an impediment to the further development of the country's civil society, and encourage the authorities to engage constructively with the NGOs themselves and other relevant parties in order to find a mutually acceptable solution, within the existing legal framework, as soon as possible.

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson.