



## **United States Mission to the OSCE**

### **Continuing Pressure on Civil Society in Azerbaijan**

As delivered by Political Counselor Christopher Robinson  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
May 15, 2014

We listened carefully last week to Azerbaijan's response to concerns raised by the European Union about the arrest, investigations, and sentencing of civil society activists, and must express our dissatisfaction with Azerbaijan's explanation. Unfortunately, Azerbaijan's explanation was couched in reference to the same policies, laws and judicial processes that gave rise to concerns in the first place. For that reason, and among others, the Azerbaijan response was unsatisfactory and we continue to see a disturbing pattern of pressure on civil society activists and journalists in Azerbaijan. And I take note of the fact that the Representative on Freedom of the Media released – while we were here in the Permanent Council – a statement on this very issue stating that the prosecution of journalists in Azerbaijan continues to erode the media freedom environment there.

We are deeply concerned by the April 19 arrest of journalist Rauf Mirkadirov, who is reportedly being held on treason charges, based on allegations of spying for Armenia. He strongly denies these charges. We are also troubled by the investigation launched on April 28 against Institute of Peace and Democracy Director Leyla Yunus and her husband, Arif Yunusov, in connection with the Institute's people-to-people dialogue, in which Mirkadirov also reportedly participated. The Mirkadirov and Yunus/Yunusov investigations involve charges related to Track II activities intended to promote a peaceful resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. All three have been strong proponents of the Track II process, and the Azerbaijani Government's actions will have a chilling effect on any contact between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. The United States urges both governments to support Track II efforts to build people-to-people contacts between Azerbaijanis and Armenians. Confidence-building measures of this kind can help prepare citizens of both countries for peace.

Furthermore, the United States is deeply disappointed by the May 6 decision to sentence eight youth activists from the NIDA youth movement to lengthy prison terms on charges that were widely regarded as politically motivated, and that did not appear to be supported by the facts presented at trial. We repeatedly encouraged Azerbaijani authorities to ensure a fair trial and respect for due process. While we welcomed Azerbaijani authorities' willingness to allow us and other embassies to monitor the trial, we observed numerous causes for concern during the trial, including irregularities in criminal procedure and evidence.

We once again urge the Azerbaijani Government to live up to its international human rights commitments, particularly in light of Azerbaijan's upcoming chairmanship of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers. The United States supports Track II efforts, as well as the freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and we urge the government of Azerbaijan to do the same. The United States remains committed to working with the

Azerbaijani Government and the Azerbaijani people to advance democratic development in Azerbaijan.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.