

HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
WATCH

**HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH**

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Palais de l'Élysée  
55 rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré  
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Paris, 17th of October 2014

**Subject: Meeting with President Ilham Aliyev - Oct 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014**

Dear President Hollande,

On October 27 you will meet with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev for the Paris OSCE summit on Nagorno Karabakh. We are writing to urge you to use this crucial opportunity to demand the immediate release of prominent human rights defenders whom the Azerbaijani authorities have thrown behind bars in recent months amid an escalating and comprehensive crackdown on civil society. The charges against them are blatantly politically motivated, and your voice is badly needed to secure their freedom.

Among them is Leyla Yunus, who had the opportunity to meet you and Mr. Fabius during your visit to Baku in May. Leyla is a Chevalier of the French Legion of Honour and founder and director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy (IPD), a nongovernmental organization that, among other things, carried out public diplomacy and sought to improve people-to-people dialogue between people in Azerbaijan and Armenia against the background of the unresolved conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Leyla's husband, Arif, a prominent historian, was also active in these projects and is also among those now in pretrial custody. The IPD has also focused on combating politically motivated prosecutions, corruption, violence against women, and unlawful evictions.

On July 30, 2014, authorities charged Leyla and Arif Yunus, with economic crimes and treason, for which they face a maximum 20-year prison term. The same day, a court sent Leyla Yunus to pretrial custody for three months. Her husband was released under police supervision because of his poor health. But on August 5, police arrested him as he was on his way to deliver food and medication to his wife. Despite his health concerns, the court sent him to pretrial detention for three months for allegedly violating the terms of his house arrest. Through her lawyers, Leyla has described being physically abused by her cellmate and a prison guard. She suffers from severe diabetes and is at risk of losing her vision in prison.

Just before her arrest, Leyla Yunus was working with several other veteran human rights defenders on a list of Azerbaijan's political prisoners and

- pressing for their release. Each of these defenders also has been arrested. They are:
- **Intigam Aliyev**, a lawyer and head of the nongovernmental group Legal Education Society, who has litigated human rights cases in domestic courts and brought hundreds of applications to the European Court of Human Rights. On August 8, authorities sent him to pretrial detention on charges of tax evasion, abuse of power, and illegal business activities. Many believe his arrest is retribution for his human rights work and criticism of Azerbaijan's poor rights record in international fora, including at the Council of Europe.
  - **Rasul Jafarov**, head of Human Rights Club, a group the authorities persistently refused to register, had carried out several campaigns against politically motivated imprisonment, including the Sing for Democracy campaign (later renamed Art for Democracy) in the lead-up to the Eurovision Song Contest in Baku in May 2012. Rasul was planning a Sport for Rights campaign in the period before the European Olympic Games, which Azerbaijan will host in summer 2015. Authorities arrested him on August 2, and charged him with operating an illegal enterprise, tax evasion, and abuse of official power.

Azerbaijani officials claim the charges against these four human rights leaders are not politically motivated but these claims do not stand up to scrutiny. The timing of their arrests strongly indicates a concerted campaign to silence the government's boldest critics. To this end the government has also cut off funding to independent groups by freezing the bank accounts of organizations and their leaders arbitrarily and without recourse and refusing them the authorization to register new grants. It has also introduced new, draconian draft laws to further restrict funding of nongovernmental groups.

It takes extraordinary courage to stand up for human rights principles and Council of Europe standards in Azerbaijan. This has never been more true than in the past two and half years, when the authorities brought or threatened blatantly bogus criminal charges against dozens of independent and opposition political activists, journalists, bloggers, and human rights defenders. Like the Yunuses, Jafarov, and Aliyev, most are behind bars. Even as the arrests mounted in recent months and the risk of their own arrest grew more likely, Leyla and her colleagues did not back down.

Now they need you to speak out on their behalf, to make clear to President Aliyev that the government of France is appalled by the imprisonment of human rights defenders, and that Azerbaijan's relationship with France cannot be business as usual as long as these four people remain behind bars.

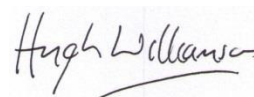
We urge you to call on Mr. Aliyev to release these individuals before his visit to France. Should they remain in jail on Oct 27th, we invite you to publicly call for their immediate release during Mr. Aliyev's France visit.

We sincerely hope that we can count on your principled leadership on this pressing matter.

Yours sincerely,



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France director  
Human Rights Watch



Hugh Williamson  
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