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The South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders condemns the recent interrogation of human rights defenders and last week arrests of youth activists and bloggers in Azerbaijan. We call upon the authorities to stop the repression of the civil society, and immediately release the five detained youth activists. We also urge the Azerbaijani authorities to respect freedom of expression and assembly of the people in Azerbaijan. We see the recent escalation of pressure by the Azerbaijani authorities as a reaction to the calls for pro-democracy protests in the country, inspired by the events in the Middle East and North Africa.

Restrictions by authorities on freedom of expression and assembly have increased dramatically in several cities in Azerbaijan the last weeks to prevent mobilization of pro-democracy protests. The arrests of five youth activists, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, Dayanat Babayev, Sakhavat Soltanli and Rashadat Akhundov, are seen by many international and national organizations as politically motivated.

On 5 February 2011 **Jabbar Savalanli**, from the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party Youth Committee was arrested in Sumgayit after posting on Facebook calls for pro-democracy protests and was charged with possession of drugs. He was sentenced to two months of pre-trial detention. On 4 March 2011, the youth activist, blogger and former parliamentary candidate **Bakhtiyar Hajiyev**, allegedly involved in organizing the planned 11 March Protest, was sentenced to 1 month pre-trial detention after violating an order not to leave the city of Ganja while previous charges of evading military service were investigated. According to Hajiyev he was not given access to his lawyer and was beaten and ill-treated by the police. Savalanli and Hajiyev can face up to three and two years of imprisonment.

On 4 March 2011, while talking on his phone on the street, the opposition political activist **Dayanat Babayev**, was arrested and sentenced to 10 days of administrative detention for "violating public order". According to Babayev, who was held incommunicado for two days, the police told him that the detention was connected with the planned 12 March 2011 opposition protest. Babayev was a few days prior to the March 4 arrest detained in front of the court, which was dealing with the case of Jabbar Savalanli. He was then released a few hours later with a warning. On 8 March 2011, the youth activist **Rashadat Akhundov** and the opposition political activist **Sakhavat Soltanli** were arrested and sentenced to five days of detention for defying police orders (Akhundov) and auto-hooliganism (Soltani). The two were not given the lawyer they asked for. Both maintain that the charges are false.

In addition to the arrests, interrogations of human rights defenders and evictions of human rights organizations have taken place last week. On 4 March **the regional office of the Election Monitoring and Democracy Training Center, Demos Public Union, and Ganja Regional Information Center were evicted from their offices** without any official reasons by executive administration representatives and police employees in Ganja.

The evening on 7 March **Mehman Huseynov and Abulfat Namazov** from the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) were **interrogated by police** for two hours after being

forced out of their car in Baku. They were questioned about Huseynov 's Facebook account, the protest action on 11 March and the activities and employees of the IRFS. On 9 March the youth activists Orxan Bayramov, Fuad Hacıyev and Famil Pashayev were released after being detained by police more than four hours.

The above-mentioned incidents illustrate the on-going systematic and escalated repression of the civil society in Azerbaijan. The South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders urges the Azerbaijani authorities:

- To comply with the international obligations to respect freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, and to refrain from the use of force against peaceful demonstrators.
- To immediately and unconditionally release the detained youth activists
- To respect the rule of law and investigate complaints regarding ill-treatment and unlawful police inspection

We call upon the international community:

- To monitor the ongoing harassment and repression and send representatives to visit the youth activists in custody.
- To put pressure on Azerbaijani authorities for the immediate release of the detained youth activists.
- To put pressure on Azerbaijani authorities to stop the repression of civil society activists and to respect the freedom of peaceful assembly in the country.
- To be present at the announced pro-democracy protests and monitor the events with regards to freedom of peaceful assembly and the concrete actions of the participants of the pro-democracy protest and the authorities.

The South Caucasus Network of Human Rights Defenders unites 30 human rights NGOs in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The Network seeks to facilitate creation of a safer and enabling environment for human rights defenders in the South Caucasus and to strengthen their voices in the region and internationally.