

Azerbaijan: Free Prisoners before Baku Games

Sport and Rights Alliance Calls on European Olympic Committees to Act

(Berlin, 7 April 2015) – Rights abuses may taint the first European Games unless the European Olympic Committees and key National Olympic Committees urge the Azerbaijani government to release unjustly imprisoned journalists and activists, the Sport and Rights Alliance said today.

Azerbaijan is to host the first European Games in the capital, Baku, from 12 - 28 June 2015. An estimated 6,000 athletes from 50 countries are to participate in 20 sports. The games are organised under the auspices of the Olympic Movement.

"The European Olympic Committees are in a unique position to raise these pressing human rights concerns with President Aliyev," said Eduard Nazarski, Amnesty International Netherlands Director. "By remaining silent, the European Olympic Committees risk sending a message that it is acceptable for the Azerbaijani government to silence critics while hosting an event that, according to the Olympic Charter, should stand for human dignity and sport at the heart of the harmonious development of society."

The Sport and Rights Alliance is a recently formed coalition including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, FIFPro – World Players' Union, Football Supporters Europe, Supporters Direct Europe, Terre des Hommes, and Transparency International Germany. The Alliance seeks to ensure that host countries of mega-sporting events respect human rights, the environment, and anti-corruption requirements at all stages of the process—from bidding through construction and preparations to host events as well as during events themselves.

In a letter recently sent to Patrick Hickey, president of the European Olympic Committees, the alliance urged the European Olympic Committees to speak out against Azerbaijan's harsh crackdown against government critics and worsening environment for media freedom, which are at odds with key principles of the Olympic Charter that the European Games are meant to uphold.

The Azerbaijani government's detention and imprisonment of leading journalists and human rights activists and its ongoing harassment of news outlets, media organisations, human rights groups, and other independent groups and activists cannot be reconciled with the Olympic Charter's principles on press freedom and human dignity, the alliance said. The crackdown on media and independent groups could have a negative impact on the work of the thousands of journalists covering the Baku Games. The Olympic Charter explicitly calls for press freedom among members of the Olympic Movement.

"Given the history of abuses and the intensified crackdown on dissent in Azerbaijan, fundamental human rights are likely to be under attack in the context of the Baku Games," the letter said.

The Sport and Rights Alliance called on the European Olympic Committees to use leverage with Azerbaijan to take three steps before the 12 June opening ceremony:

- 1) **Immediately and unconditionally release** all unjustly imprisoned journalists and human rights activists, including Khajida Ismayilova, Leyla Yunus, Arif Yunus, Intigam Aliyev, Rasul Jafarov, Rauf Mirgadirov, Anar Mammadli, Ilgar Mammadov, and Tofiq Yagulblu.
- 2) **End the harassment, intimidation, arbitrary detention**, and politically motivated prosecution of human rights of activists, lawyers, journalists, opposition members and others for the legitimate exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.
- 3) **Refrain from the arbitrary denial** of registration to human rights and pro-democracy groups and amend the law on nongovernmental groups that unduly restricts media outlets, human rights organisations, and other independent groups from functioning and carrying out legitimate work.

"The Azerbaijani government is investing billions of dollars and vast amounts of energy in the European Games and in other sports events while aggressively pursuing those who criticize or challenge the authorities," Nazarski said. "Media outlets and NGOs have been shut down and Amnesty International has identified at least 20 prisoners of conscience, behind bars on trumped up criminal charges that can carry very long prison sentences."

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