

**REPORTERS
WITHOUT BORDERS**
FOR PRESS FREEDOM

President Barack H. Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Paris, 23 September 2009

Dear President Obama,

Reporters Without Borders, an international press freedom organisation, would like to draw your attention to the situation of journalists and bloggers in Azerbaijan, whose president, Ilham Aliyev, you are due to meet tomorrow.

Azerbaijan may be an ally of the United States but the press freedom situation there is extremely tense. Ranked 101st in the first Reporters Without Borders press freedom index in 2002, it has since fallen to 146th (out of 175 countries) in the 2009 index, while President Aliyev is on our list of "Predators of Press Freedom."

The opposition and independent media are subject to extreme forms of harassment (including murder) and the Internet is no longer spared the government's determination to curtail free speech.

A journalist and two bloggers are currently in prison for making legitimate use of their right to freedom of expression:

- Journalist Eynulla Fatullayev (the founder and editor of two newspapers that are now closed, *Gundelik Azerbaijan* and *Realny Azerbaijan*) has been detained since 20 April 2007 and was sentenced in 2008 to eight and a half years in prison for "insulting the honour and dignity of the Azerbaijani nation." He was given an additional two-year sentence in July of this year on a trumped-up charge of possession of 220 mg of heroin. In a 22 April ruling, the European Court of Human Rights ordered Azerbaijan to release him at once and pay him 25,000 euros in compensation. The authorities have refused to comply and say they are going to appeal.

- Bloggers Adnan Hajizade and Emin Milli have been held since 8 July 2009. They are the victims of an outrageous judicial practice under which journalists and activists are charged with common crimes. They were sentenced to 24 and 30 months in prison respectively on 11 November 2009 on charges of hooliganism and deliberate physical violence. Their latest appeal was rejected by the supreme court on 19 August. Mr. Hajizade's request for release on parole, for which he qualified, was rejected in July. The next hearing in the case will be on 1 October.

The Azerbaijani authorities have until now turned a deaf ear to all the protests that have been expressed by the international community including your Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and a recent international mission to Azerbaijan.

We therefore urge you, Mr. President, to raise this issue with your Azerbaijani counterpart and to relay the requests for the release of these three prisoners that have been made by many civil society organisations and international NGOs such as Reporters Without Borders. We thank you in advance for not sacrificing freedom of expression to the strategic interests at stake.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. Julliard', written over a horizontal line.

Jean-François Julliard
Secretary-General

