

His Excellency the President of Azerbaijan
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Dear Mr. President,

I am writing to express ARTICLE 19's grave concern in response to:

- the growing number of arrests and violent attacks on media representatives, in Azerbaijan; and
- the lack of transparency surrounding police investigations into these cases, which often remain inconclusive.

The latest case is the one of satirist and poet Sakit Zakhidov (Mirza Sakit), who is a regular contributor to the *Azadlig* newspaper and some other publications. He was arrested by police on June 23 under the accusation of possessing and selling heroin. Mr. Zakhidov claims and many observers believe the allegations against him are fabricated and politically motivated to punish him for his satirical poems criticising current politicians and the former President of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev. Only yesterday, one month after the poet's arrest, Mr. Zakhidov and his lawyer were given access to the prosecution materials. According to them, there is no evidence of Mr. Zakhidov selling drugs, and presumably forged evidence to prove his use of drugs. In addition, they noted numerous procedural mistakes during the arrest and the investigation.

Other cases of potentially politically motivated attacks on journalists in which police investigations have been opaque and inconclusive, include:

- the abduction and brutal beating of Bakhaddin Khaziyeu, editor-in-chief of Bizim Yol, in May 2006;
- the attack on Azadlig reporter Fikret Huseinli who was cut with a knife and beaten after receiving threats related to his articles on corruption and criminal activities involving government officials, in March 2006;
- the murder of government-critical journalist Elmar Huseynov in 2005.

The weakness of the investigative processes related to these cases violates Azerbaijan's international obligations to protect human rights and runs contrary to your country's political and legal commitments to the democratic process. This creates a strong chilling effect on the media which fosters an atmosphere of self-censorship and ultimately undermines the credibility of Azerbaijan's democracy.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers'

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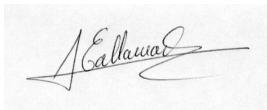
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We would therefore like to add our voice to the chorus of Azerbaijani human rights organizations and media groups, as well as international organizations, and call on you to:

- Ensure a thorough, independent and transparent investigation into the case of Sakit Zakhidov is carried out;
- Guarantee Mr. Sakhidov's right to a fair trial in an independent court;
- Take measures to prevent violent attacks on journalists and, when such crimes occur, to bring the perpetrators to justice;
- Take decisive measures to curb police misconduct;
- Ensure the work of the police and judiciary is protected against any form of political interference.

ARTICLE 19 enjoys a strong relationship with governments all over the world and we would like to take this opportunity to offer our services should you wish to discuss further the measures necessary to ensure the fundamental right to freedom of expression is enjoyed by all people in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Agnès Callamard
Executive Director