



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Human Rights in Azerbaijan Since the COP 29 UN Climate Change Conference

Rep. Chris Smith, Co-Chairman

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Good morning and welcome to everyone joining us. We are here today to take stock on human rights in Azerbaijan. Sadly, Azerbaijan is a dictatorship, under the rule of Ilham Aliyev, who controls and exploits the country as a fiefdom for his extended family. Five months ago the COP 29 UN Climate Change Conference took place in Baku, Azerbaijan. The dictatorship intended the COP 29 conference to be an event that would significantly increase its prestige and acceptance in international circles. Did it turn out that way?

That is one main question here today – another is, what are the policies toward Azerbaijan that Congress should be promoting in its work with the Trump administration?

I am preparing legislation, an Azerbaijan Democracy Act, that will respond very specifically to the worsening situation in Azerbaijan, and the testimony we hear today will inform that legislation.

Looking at the COP 29 Conference, I have to really doubt that the Aliyev dictatorship saw this as a success for them. Seeing that controversy over the government's abominable human rights record dogged the run-up to the conference, many countries did not participate in the conference or sent only low-level delegations. Also in the run-up to the conference, most press reporting did include significant mention of the government's worsening brutality toward both ethnic Azerbaijanis and Armenians.

For that low level of participation, we have to thank the many brave human rights defenders who, often at risk to themselves, created focus on the regime's horrific abuses.

Human rights monitors reported sharply intensified internal repression of Azerbaijani citizens as well as transnational repression of Azerbaijani diaspora abroad. This seems to have begun around the end of 2022, but to have gotten much worse in the run-up to COP 29 – including, of course, the suspicious brutal murder last October, in France, of a prominent opposition figure.

Regarding internal repression, Meydan.tv reported in February a total of 357 political prisoners in Azerbaijan. This is a significantly increased number over recent years.

There are several political prisoners whom I want to mention by name, not to diminish our concern for the many others, but in order to put

a face on the suffering of Azerbaijanis – and because we have a special responsibility to work for the release of these people.

Dr. Gubad Ibadoglu is a renowned economist with an expertise in exposing and fighting corruption. After Azerbaijan's 2014 civil society crackdown, Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu fled and joined NED's Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellowship. He held positions at Princeton, Rutgers, and the London School of Economics. In July 2023, during a visit to his sick mother in Baku, he was abducted, falsely charged, and detained for 274 days under inhumane conditions, apparently calculated to aggravate his health conditions, including a dangerous heart aneurysm.

Dr. Ibadoghlu now remains under house arrest and constant surveillance, with his health steadily worsening. His family faces retaliation: recently the government opened a fabricated case against his brother, Galib Bayramov(Galeb Bayiromov), who faces up to 12 years in prison. Dr. Ibadoghlu faces up to 17 years in prison under a judiciary controlled by President Ilham Aliyev.

Farid Mehralizada was a journalist, and worked in Azerbaijan for Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty. I hope the executive branch recognizes that the U.S. government owes this man the same vigor and seriousness of effort to secure his release that we make for U.S. citizens in the same situation.

Anar Mammadli. He was arrested in 2013 for reporting on election fraud. In 2014 I met with his relatives in Baku – on that trip I met with other dissidents and relatives, as well as with the dictator. And I did talk to him about his terrible human rights record – respectfully and firmly. After Congress and the Council of Europe took up Mammadli's case, he was released in 2016. Also a climate activist, he was arrested again, in front of his children at school, as part of the pre-COP 29 crackdown. This was on April 29, 2024 – making today the one-year anniversary of his unjust imprisonment. This is a very brave man and a true patriot. He's knowingly made tremendous personal sacrifices in order to improve his country.

Did any of the UN or US diplomats who green-lighted this UN climate conference to Azerbaijan ever consider the trail of human misery they were setting in motion?

We will also talk about Armenian political prisoners and POWs. These cases are not about repressing domestic opposition or journalists in order to maintain control of the country – because there are very, very few Armenians in Azerbaijan. Aliyev's incitement of ethnic hatred has made it too dangerous for them to live there. Rather Aliyev took prisoners, during the conquest of Artsakh, and uses them to manipulate the anger of Azerbaijan's exploited citizens away from the Aliyev clan and toward a supposed external enemy.

We will hear an exclusive report from a former senior official of the Republic of Artsakh about what has happened there since Aliyev ethnically cleansed the region in 2023. Very few Armenians remain in Artsakh –due to the bloodthirsty anti-Armenian incitement of the Aliyev government. But we need to work for the release of the political prisoners and POWs held by the government of Azerbaijan, to protect Armenian cultural heritage, and to uphold their right to return, one day, to live in peace and freedom in Nagorno-Karabakh.