



Human Rights Watch Statement

Item 6: UPR Outcome Report on Azerbaijan

11 June 2009

Thank you Mr. President,

Human Rights Watch welcomes the UPR process on Azerbaijan as an important opportunity to highlight key human rights concerns in Azerbaijan, and for the government of Azerbaijan to commit to concrete, urgently-needed human rights reforms to address them.

One such commitment Human Rights Watch was pleased to note Azerbaijan make was its decision to issue a standing invitation to all special procedures.

The UPR process on Azerbaijan brought a spotlight on a number of core areas of concern that have also been the focus of Human Rights Watch's own work on Azerbaijan, and that we have raised with the authorities as part of our engagement with the government. They include harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders, violations of freedom of assembly, politically motivated arrests and prosecutions, and torture and ill-treatment in police custody.

But the area where improvements are perhaps most acutely needed is that of media freedoms, which have deteriorated steadily over the past several years. Concerns falling in this area were raised by numerous states during the UPR process, including the use of criminal libel and other criminal charges to stifle critical reporting and imprison journalists.

The wrongful imprisonment of Eynulla Fatullayev is a case in point. The outspoken founder and editor-in-chief of two of Azerbaijan's largest independent newspapers – Realny Azerbaijan and Gundelik Azerbaijan – Fatullayev was sentenced in October 2007 to an eight and a half year prison term on politically motivated charges of fomenting terrorism, inciting ethnic hatred, and tax evasion. These charges were the culmination of a series of prior criminal charges—including libel and insult—that the authorities had brought against Mr. Fatullayev in fall 2006 and spring 2007.

In addition to Fatullayev, at least three other journalists also serve lengthy prison sentences on politically motivated charges, and Human Rights Watch has documented at least two new cases in which authorities have pressed criminal charges against journalists in Azerbaijan just since the UPR in February this year.

Journalists in Azerbaijan also face the risk of attacks ranging from verbal assaults to physical aggression, which almost without exception go unpunished. Authorities also silence independent media through politically motivated legal proceedings resulting in eviction from their offices and confiscation of property.

The government has also imposed impediments on the operation of foreign media, by discontinuing local transmission of key radio services and in October 2008 barring foreign television and radio companies from using satellite equipment for live broadcasting.

Human Rights Watch urges the government of Azerbaijan to accept and implement all recommendations flowing from the UPR process, particularly in the area of media freedoms. Specifically, it should immediately release Eynulla Fatullayev and other journalists imprisoned on politically motivated charges, and decriminalize libel.