

Statement Regarding the U.S. State Department 2012 Human Rights Report on Azerbaijan

U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan Richard Morningstar

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Today, I met with a group of Azerbaijani contacts to thank them for their contributions to the recently released U.S. State Department 2012 Human Rights Report on Azerbaijan, to discuss the report and to hear their opinion on the current situation of human rights in Azerbaijan.

In accordance with U.S. law, the U.S. Department of State submits reports to Congress every year on the human rights situation in all countries in the world. In recent years, these reports have included an assessment of the United States itself. This is because we recognize that no country is perfect and that we must all strive to do our best to meet international standards.

The 2012 report on Azerbaijan gave special attention to three areas of concern:

- First, the report cited restrictions on freedom of expression, including intimidation, arrest, and use of force against journalists and human rights and democracy activists online and offline.
- Second, the report cited restrictions on freedom of assembly, including the regular denial of permission for peaceful protests and the forceful dispersal of unsanctioned protests, often including the detention of peaceful demonstrators.
- The third area of concern in 2012 involved the unfair administration of justice, including continued reports of arbitrary arrest and detention, politically motivated imprisonment, lack of due process, executive influence over the judiciary, and lengthy pretrial detention.

The report also gave the government credit for progress in some areas. On freedom of assembly, it noted that three demonstrations were authorized last spring, albeit outside of the city center of Baku. It also noted how the Presidential Administration facilitated a large and conciliatory meeting with more than 100 civil society representatives, including some who were most critical of the government, to hear their complaints and offer a dialogue. This was a good start that civil society representatives welcomed, and we encourage the government to follow up on this initiative, especially in advance of this year's presidential elections.

Since I have been here, there has been progress in addressing human trafficking, and dealing with corruption at the local level, including the opening of the ASAN Service Center, and the government is beginning to confront abuses by local authorities.

I also want to stress that, while the report covers 2012 only, my government is seriously concerned about the increasing restrictions of freedom of expression that we have seen so far in 2013. In a presidential election year such as this, an open environment for democratic debate and expression is critical.

In this regard, the May 14 amendments to the Criminal Code on defamation on the Internet raise concern. We urge the authorities not to use these proposed amendments to stifle government opponents or civil society activists on social media. The U.S. government is also troubled by the reaction of Azerbaijani authorities to protests this year, including the arrest and interrogation of democracy activists, pressure on political parties and civil society organizations such as the Free Thought University.

Lastly, while there have been concerns this year between our government and the government of Azerbaijan related to the role of the National Democratic Institute in Azerbaijan, I believe we have recently made progress in resolving these concerns.

I applauded the work of my guests and their efforts to keep our attention focused on these complicated issues.

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