

**Transcript**  
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**U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan Richard Morningstar**

**Remarks—As Delivered**

**National Conference:**

**Safe to Speak: Securing Freedom of Expression in all Media  
Baku, Azerbaijan**

**May 2, 2013**

Thank you. It is an honor to be here with you in celebration of World Press Freedom Day.

Every year on this important occasion, we recognize the essential contribution of a free press to the workings of democracy and honor the sacrifices of those who are working to establish independent media throughout the world.

Tomorrow, May 3, was proclaimed World Press Freedom Day by the UN General Assembly in 1993 for two primary reasons:

- to raise awareness of the importance of a free press, and
- to remind governments around the world about their duties under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to respect and uphold the right to freedom of expression.

In the United States and elsewhere, democracies have learned that independent media not only inform and educate the public but also help hold authorities accountable for their actions.

The press gives us a trained set of eyes and ears that can identify problems in ways that ordinary citizens often cannot. Media reporting also provides an important

source of information for government officials that, among other things, lets them know how well—or how poorly—they and their subordinates are really doing in implementing improvements to society.

In my mind, at least two things are necessary for freedom of the press to take root in any society:

First, an independent judiciary is necessary to define and enforce media law, including defamation law, and to keep the press safe from attacks by the other branches of government.

Second, journalists have a responsibility to report the facts fairly, accurately, and—to the best of their ability—objectively. Professional journalists do not publish rumors or speculation, but work hard to corroborate information in order to protect their work from attack on the grounds of inaccuracy or defamation. They have learned that with freedom comes responsibility.

In my mind, there is work to be done in Azerbaijan on both accounts. I am deeply disappointed, to put it mildly, for example, by the lack of progress in the investigation into the despicable smear campaign against RFE/RL reporter Khadija Ismayilova last year and I note the release of a new video this year intending to intimidate her.

Yafez Hasanov, another RFE/RL journalist has also endured severe harassment, reportedly from Nakhchivani authorities, related to his reporting.

On the other hand, even while we see the concept of defamation abused to intimidate journalists who perform their essential function of holding governments accountable, too many newspapers and blogs in Azerbaijan, across the whole political spectrum, too often print rumors and speculation as fact, that are totally untrue.

I will give you one example of facts being totally mistaken, a small example that happened yesterday. It was reported on two media sites that I was called back for urgent consultations in the United States. Well... Here I am. And, Roland, you

can touch me. It really is me that is here.

That is not a huge deal but it is an example of how facts are so often misstated. It has happened in my case with allegations on the things that I said, that just are not true. And it happens, again, across the whole political spectrum. It is important that all journalists are responsible.

I emphasize that we want Azerbaijan to succeed, to bolster its success in economic development by creating conditions where a robust democracy can flourish. Unpunished harassment of journalists and unprofessional spreading of slanderous rumors is detrimental to that goal.

I would also note that it is in Azerbaijan's interests to support professional training opportunities for its aspiring journalists and to encourage a justice system that is able to define media law independently.

I want to reaffirm our commitment to media freedom in Azerbaijan. Our embassy will continue to work in partnership with the government of Azerbaijan, civil society, and members of the media to promote a media environment that is ethical, professional, and free.

History has shown us time and again that our countries owe their fundamental stability to freedom of expression.

There is no question that when we create conditions in which we can air our differences without intimidation and engage in meaningful, mature, and objective, and I want to repeat *objective* public discussion on critical issues, we make our democracies stronger.

Thank you.

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