

CDA Remarks to Press
Preceding Human Rights Roundtable

DCMR 11 July 2012

Thank you for coming today. I've convened this gathering of NGO representatives involved in human rights to discuss the recent release of our 2011 Human Rights Report on Azerbaijan, to thank them for their dedication to this challenging work, and to hear their opinion on the current situation of human rights in Azerbaijan.

As you know by now, among the issues in the 2011 report, three received special attention. First there were significant concerns over property rights violations, including numerous forced evictions and demolitions of homes, often on dubious eminent domain grounds. Owners complained of inadequate compensation and of being unable to afford comparable housing. Second, the judicial system continued to suffer from numerous problems. Complaints included undue executive influence over the judiciary, a lack of due process in judicial proceedings, politically motivated imprisonments, and punitive measures taken against independent attorneys. The third area of concern in 2011 involved restrictions on the freedom of assembly and expression. Applications to hold demonstrations were often denied, and unsanctioned protests were forcefully dispersed. Most notably, political protests in the spring of 2011 were forcefully dispersed and over a dozen of the participants and organizers received prison sentences of 1-3 years.

The release of most of these prisoners – including nine pardoned in June of this year – has given us all reason for optimism. I want to reiterate our calls for a fair and transparent judicial process for those that remain in jail, including Vidadi Iskandarov and Shahin Hasanli.

In December of last year, President Aliyev signed a National Action Plan to improve the protection of human rights in Azerbaijan. We applaud the spirit of this action plan and urge its effective implementation. It is hard to believe that 2012 is already half way over. Looking at this year so far, some progress has been made, but there is more work to be done.

For example, early this spring, Baku authorities approved several opposition-organized protests. This is a good start which I hope expands throughout the year. We also welcome the recent meeting between the Presidential Administration and

representatives of civil society – in which many of my guests today participated – and we hope this is only the start of a continuous and constructive dialogue.

There are still areas of concern though. There have been arrests this year of political activists which we continue to follow closely, including the arrest of those involved in March protests in Quba, the arrest of Sabirabad activists Oqtay Qulaliyev and Ilham Amiraslanov, the arrest of Talysh activist Hilal Mammadov, as well as the pending charges against photo-blogger Mehman Huseynov. We stress the need for fair and transparent judicial processes in all these cases in accordance with Azerbaijan's constitutional and international commitments.

Lastly, I want to reiterate my government's calls for progress in the investigations into several disturbing incidents concerning the freedom of the press, including investigations into the beating of journalist Idrak Abbasov, attempts to publicly shame journalist Khadija Ismayilova, and the murder of journalist Rafiq Taghi.

I applaud the work of my guests and their efforts to keep our attention focused on these complicated issues. I am looking forward to my discussion with them today. Thank you.