

## **Charge d’Affaire Adam Sterling’s Speech Marking the 20th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations**

**April 5, 2012**

**As drafted**

Welcome and thank you, everyone, for coming tonight to help us mark 20 years of diplomatic relations between the United States and Azerbaijan.

I would like to express special thanks to Ambassador Hafiz Pashayev, Deputy Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan, for representing his government here tonight. I would also like to recognize some special visitors from Washington. First, Azerbaijan's Ambassador to the United States, Elin Suleymanov, is here this evening. Second, we are delighted to welcome a delegation of ten senior staff from the U.S. Congress. Their presence at this reception, and the week-long study trip that brought them to Azerbaijan, testifies to the importance that the United States attaches to understanding, and to building ever stronger ties with, this dynamic and important country. As we just saw in the video, these 20 years of diplomatic relations between Azerbaijan and the United States have been full of change. The Intourist Hotel where the U.S. Embassy was first located no longer exists. In its place, a host of ultra-modern hotels has risen.

The changing face of Baku is emblematic of the remarkable distance Azerbaijan has traveled in the 20 years since it regained its independence during a period of conflict and hardship. The United States has supported, and will do its best to continue supporting, the progress Azerbaijan is making in its development as a peaceful, prosperous, and independent democracy. A strong Azerbaijan is a strong partner for the United States, both within its own important region and around the globe. And, as a Muslim-majority, secular democracy that has overcome centuries of foreign domination and maintained long traditions of tolerance and modernism – Azerbaijan did, after all, allow women to vote before the United States -- Azerbaijan can serve as a model and a leader in this region and beyond.

Over these past 20 years, we’ve worked together to establish what Secretary Clinton called during her visit to Baku, “ deep, important, and durable bonds between the United States and Azerbaijan.” These bonds are based on shared interests and cooperation in the areas of security and energy, as well as democratic and economic reform.

Azerbaijan plays a key role in international security and counter-terrorism efforts. Azerbaijani and American soldiers have stood together in Kosovo, Iraq and now Afghanistan. Azerbaijan has also served as a vital transportation route for supporting NATO operations in Afghanistan.

Our diplomats are now serving together to safeguard global security on the UN Security Council. On security closer to home, no issue is more important than our common commitment to a peaceful and fair settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk

Group, the United States continues to work closely with the sides to achieve a lasting negotiated settlement.

On energy, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline stands as testament to the strong cooperation between our governments over the past 20 years. Today we share the goal of establishing a southern corridor for exporting Azerbaijan's natural gas to Europe. On democratic and economic reforms, Azerbaijan and the United States have as well a long record of cooperation. We look forward to continuing to work together in promoting rule of law, fundamental freedoms, a vibrant civil society, and other reforms essential to the full realization of Azerbaijan's extraordinary potential.

Yet as important as the government to government relationship is, the heart of the U.S.-Azerbaijani relationship lies in our people, as your presence here tonight proves. Embassy programs have played a large role in fostering these ties. I hope all of you will have a chance to visit some of the tables around the room to learn more about these programs. And I'm happy to look out into the audience and see so many alumni of U.S. university education and U.S. Embassy cultural exchange programs here among us.

With their profound understanding of both U.S. and Azerbaijani cultures and values, our alumni are a bridge between our countries, helping to deepen the bonds between our nations. I'd also like to mention tonight's musical guests. As a long-time jazz aficionado and former jazz disc jockey, I am especially gratified that we have a distinguished trio of Azerbaijani jazz musicians:

Elchin Shirinov, piano

Ruslan Huseynov, bass

Elvin Bashirov, drums

Jazz is a passion that Americans and Azerbaijanis share. Azerbaijani artists, starting with Vagif Mustafazadeh, who learned to play jazz by listening during the 1950s and 60s to Wilson Conover's jazz show on Voice of America, have taken this quintessentially American art form and fused it with Azerbaijani elements to create a blend of the American with the Azerbaijani in a way that the entire world can enjoy.

I would now like to turn to our distinguished guest, Ambassador Pashayev, who has been at the center of most of the history of relations between our countries. He was the first ambassador of Azerbaijan to the United States, a position he held for 13 years. Today, as deputy foreign minister and rector of the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy, he remains a special friend of the United States, and one we are honored to have here this evening. Deputy Minister Pashayev.