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PRESS RELEASE

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Ambassador Morningstar Speaks to Free Thought University

Following news that authorities had closed Free Thought University's facility yesterday, U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan Richard Morningstar met the group at a hotel to give his previously scheduled speech.

"I am honored to be here," the ambassador said while praising the work done by Free Thought University. He pointed out that the organization had received the first "Ambassadorial Award for Freedom of Expression over the Internet from the U.S. Mission to the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe in 2010" for its innovative use of new media to promote democratic reforms, civil society, independent media, human rights, and the rule of law.

The ambassador noted that the embassy often takes visiting officials to Free Thought University because it offers such a delightful forum for thoughtful, engaging discussion—"the kind of thing one finds at any good university campus" he said.

Before taking questions, the ambassador said, "I am a friend of Azerbaijan, and I admire its achievements since it regained independence in 1991, but I have been troubled by the government's reaction to protests this year, including the arrest and interrogation of youth active in protests and in civil society movements. I was particularly disappointed to hear that authorities closed Free Thought University's office just last night."

"I believe that respect for peaceful protests, independent and transparent courts, and government engagement with citizens, especially its young citizens, to address their legitimate concerns are the best and most effective ways democratic governments can secure their fundamental stability," Ambassador Morningstar said.

The ambassador stressed that Azerbaijan is a strong and valued partner of the United States in the areas of regional and energy security, but he noted that they are part of a larger relationship that includes democratic and economic reform.

"U.S. support for democratic development worldwide reflects our values but is also based on pragmatic considerations." Ambassador Morningstar said in closing. "As former Secretary Clinton said during one of her visits to Baku, our closest relationships are with democratic states that respect the full range of human rights of their citizens. We want and need strong partners to deal with complex challenges around the world, and the strong democracies are our strongest partners.

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