

## **Arrest of US prize awarded Rufat Safarov**

On December 3, the executive director of the "Defense Line" human rights organization, human rights defender Rufat Safarov, was detained by law enforcement officers.<sup>1</sup>

He is charged under Articles 221.1 (hooliganism), 178.3.2 (fraud causing significant damage), and 127.2.3 (causing minor harm to health intentionally) of the Criminal Code, and a 4-month detention measure has been chosen against him regarding these charges.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs has reported that a conflict occurred between Rufat Safarov and another person regarding land sales, and his detention is related to this.

Safarov dismissed the allegations as fabricated and nonsensical, stating that he was arrested to prevent his activities in the field of human rights, his recognition as a recipient of the "Human Rights Defender Award" by the U.S. Secretary of State, and his participation in the award ceremony.

On the occasion of International Human Rights Day on December 10, the Secretary of State's Human Rights Defender Awards were presented to well-known human rights defenders from several countries at the U.S. Department of State.<sup>2</sup>

One of the winners is Rufat Safarov, an Azerbaijani human rights defender and co-founder of the "Defense Line" organization. A week ago, shortly after leaving a meeting at the U.S. embassy in Baku to obtain a visa for this event, Rufat Safarov was detained and a preventive measure of arrest was chosen against him. The fact that his seat reserved for award winners on stage was empty has drawn attention.

At the end of the photo ceremony, which was followed by applause, Antony Blinken reached into the empty seat dedicated to Rufat Safarov and took a commemorative picture with his prize.

Rufat Safarov, formerly an investigator for the Zardab District Attorney's Office, resigned at the end of 2015 after accusing the Azerbaijani authorities of human rights violations and illegal acts in the country. He has since been jailed on bribery charges, and in September 2016 he was sentenced to nine years in prison by the Lankaran Grave Crimes Court. The former investigator denied the charges against him. He was released on pardon in 2019.<sup>3</sup>

In July 2020, the human rights organization "Defense Line" was founded by a group of human rights defenders. Safarov is the executive director of this organization.

## **Arrest of "Meydan TV" journalists**

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://turan.az/en/politics/human-rights-defender-rufat-safarov-detained-787745>

<sup>2</sup> <https://turan.az/az/siyaset/blinken-rufet-seferovu-insan-huquqlari-sahesinde-ali-mukafatla-teltif-edib-ve-azerbaycani-hagsiz-yere-saxlanilanlari-azad-etmeye-cagirib>

<sup>3</sup> <https://report.az/daxili-siyaset/rufet-seferov-efv-edildi/>

On December 6, six employees of Meydan TV – Aynur Ganbarova (Elgunash), Aysel Umudova, Aytaj Ahmadova (Tapdig), Khayala Aghayeva, Ramin Jabrayilzada (Deko), and Natig Javadli, as well as a representative of civil society, Ulvi Tahirov, who has no connection to Meydan TV, and several other individuals were detained.

Although the other detained individuals were released after being questioned by the police, the individuals named above were charged under Article 206.3.2 of the Criminal Code (smuggling committed by a group of persons in prior collusion).

On December 8, each of them was sentenced to 4 months of pre-trial detention under this article for the investigation period.<sup>4</sup>

The homes of the detained journalists were searched, and their phones, computers, and other personal belongings were seized.

The arrested journalists have pleaded not guilty.

Although appeals to higher courts regarding their arrests were made, the courts have continued to detain them.

Meydan TV employees have stated that they were punished for their critical activities.<sup>5</sup>

Ahmad Mukhtar, a photojournalist who was held at the same time as Meydan TV's journalists, was sentenced to 20 days of administrative imprisonment on December 8.<sup>6</sup>

He was found guilty under Articles 510 (petty hooliganism) and 535.1 (disobeying the police) of the Code of Administrative Offenses of Azerbaijan.

“Meydan TV” was founded in 2013 and declared that it is a media organization that impartially and objectively spreads the events taking place in Azerbaijan.

During its independent operation, the media has faced pressure from the authorities from time to time.<sup>7</sup>

In 2015, a criminal case was opened against “Meydan TV”, his employee Shirin Tire (Abbasov) was arrested for 30 days, journalists cooperating with the channel were banned from leaving the country.

According to the decision of the European Court, the government of Azerbaijan was forced to remove this ban in 2019 because the government's ban on journalists leaving the country was considered illegal.

In 2017, Meydan TV's website was blocked in the country. The channel's account on social networks has been repeatedly cyberattacked and its materials removed.

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://turan.az/en/politics/the-court-has-begun-to-consider-cases-on-the-arrest-of-meydan-tv-journalists-787933>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.meydan.tv/en/article/meydan-tvs-statement-regarding-latest-arrests-of-journalists/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://turan.az/en/politics/photo-reporter-ahmed-mukhtar-arrested-for-20-days-787956>

<sup>7</sup> <https://turan.az/en/social/journalists-collaborating-with-meydantv-summoned-to-mdcoc-again-updated>

In 2021, a study by the OCCRP found that the government listened to the phone numbers of people who collaborated with the channel through the Pegasus spyware program, developed by the Israeli NSO.

About 25 journalists have been arrested in Azerbaijan over the past 13 months.

The arrests of employees of “Meydan” TV after the arrests of employees of “AbzasMedia” and “Toplum” TV show that the repression policy of the authorities against independent and critical media in Azerbaijan has increased. If the authorities previously carried out the arrest of journalists individually, this time - in 13 months, they carry out arrests in groups. It was also calculated to completely dismantle media outlets, which the authorities subjected to repression. The authorities thus want to demonstrate that they do not want to hear critical voices in the country.

In the media outlets close to the authorities, a smear campaign is being conducted against the imprisoned journalists, and the information transmitted by the investigation is also used in that smear campaign.

### **Arrest of independent politician Azer Gasimli**

On December 8, the head of the Political Management Institute, Azer Gasimli, was detained by police. He was charged under Criminal Code Article 182.2.3 (in cases involving intimidation, extortion), and on December 10 he was sentenced to four months' imprisonment by a court of law.<sup>8</sup>

“There is a person who owes Azer Gasimli. Gasimli won the courts. Now they have summoned the man, and supposedly Azer Gasimli has demanded money from him in a threatening manner,” attorney Agil Lahij told local media.

Azer Gasimli does not accept the charge and said his detention in court was related to his social and political activities.

When Azer Gasimli tried to leave the country on November 22, he was informed at the Baku International Airport that he was barred from the country.

He planned to travel to Prague, Czech Republic, and from there to Berlin on November 22. Passport control of Baku International Airport told him that the Ministry of Internal Affairs had barred his exit from the country.

“I believe that this ban is a political decision and pressure against me for criticizing the government's policy. This ban is illegal and can only be imposed on the basis of defamation”, he told local media.

On November 25, Azer Gasimli was summoned to the Baku City Main Police Department and was interrogated there as a witness. He was released after three and a half hours.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://turan.az/en/politics/arrested-azer-gasimli-787991>

<sup>9</sup> <https://turan.az/en/politics/azer-gasymly-summoned-to-capitals-police-station-787411>

Azer Qasimli stated that he was questioned as a witness in a criminal case and did not disclose which criminal case it was due to having provided a written confession.

He also mentioned that many questions were asked about the activities of the Political Management Institute he leads during the investigation.

Azer Qasimli was informed by border guards that he was banned from leaving the country by the Prosecutor General's Office when he attempted to cross the Boyuk Kesik border post to go to Georgia for a conference on September 29, 2016.

A. Gasimli appealed to the Prosecutor General's Office of the Republic of Azerbaijan on 29 September 2016 on the ground that there was no legal basis for banning him from the country and that they should withdraw this prohibition without undue delay, but there was no restriction on his exit from the country.

He appealed to the European Court of Human Rights on the above issue on March 7, 2017. The court upheld the appeal on December 13, 2018. The Azerbaijani government did not appeal this decision, and the European court's decision entered into force on March 13, 2019.

In 2019, the ban on Azer Gasimli's exit from the country was lifted.

### **Activist sentenced to 3 years in prison**

Activist Ilhamiz Guliyev was sentenced to three years' imprisonment in a trial chaired by Judge Azer Taghiyev at the Baku Grave Crimes Court on December 12.<sup>10</sup>

The court classified the charge brought against him under Article 234.4.3 (illegal trafficking of narcotic drugs for the purpose of selling in large quantities) of the Criminal Code as Article 234.1-1 (illegal acquisition, storage, production, processing, transportation of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances in large quantities without the purpose of selling).

In court, activist Ilhamiz Guliyev stated once again that he does not consider himself guilty, noting that the reason for his arrest is related to the interview he gave to "Abzas Media." He referred to his arrest as ordered. The state prosecutor had requested that Ilhamiz Guliyev be deprived of his freedom for a period of 7 years.

Ilhamiz Guliyev was arrested on December 4, 2023 and charged with article 234.4.3 of the Criminal Code (Mass preparation, production, acquisition, storage, transportation, shipment or sale of drugs).

According to relatives, he was subjected to violence during his detention. According to human rights activists, the reason for his arrest was an interview Guliyev gave to Abzas Media, in which he spoke about the use of "undocumented drugs" by the police to persecute political activists.

Although the US and European states and human rights organizations based there have issued statements condemning politically motivated arrests in Azerbaijan and demanding the release of political prisoners, the Azerbaijani authorities ignore these statements, on the contrary,

---

<sup>10</sup> <https://turan.az/en/politics/ilhamiz-guliyev-sentenced-to-three-years-in-prison-788115>

people close to the authorities and the media say that there are no politically motivated arrests in Azerbaijan and so on. They say that the statements are interference in the internal affairs of Azerbaijan.

The local community of Azerbaijan has formed the opinion that the United States and Europe do not exert sufficient pressure on the Azerbaijani authorities on human rights, but are content with the statements. This does not concern the Azerbaijani authorities. Local activists believe that the United States and Europe do not put enough pressure on the Azerbaijani authorities on human rights compared to neighboring Georgia.