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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[6 February 2023]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Threats to Life and Safety of Human Rights Defenders in Azerbaijan

The Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) would like to draw the attention of HRC to the deplorable human rights situation in Azerbaijan. The Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) is particularly concerned about the plight of Azerbaijani human rights defenders inside and outside the country.

The Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) notes with concern that repression and violations affect almost the entire spectrum of human rights. The Azerbaijani authorities, unfortunately, continue to neglect their international commitments and obligations. The Azerbaijani government has been taking repressive measures against the media and critical voices and passing legislation contrary to international standards, which casts serious doubt on its conscientiousness in fulfilling its commitments and obligations. Instead of solving the problem of political prisoners the government of Azerbaijan still widely practices politically motivated arrests.

Starting at the beginning of 2022 and continuing this year, the situation has dramatically worsened. There have been numerous flagrant violations perpetrated by the Azerbaijani authorities in respect of its international obligations to protect and defend human rights and freedoms, especially including but not limited to the freedom of expression. Suppression of free voices in the country and creating obstacles to the normal functioning of civil society have grown exponentially.

It should be noted that last year, the persistent, occasional fighting on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border added to the general climate of repression and control. Using this pretext, the Azerbaijani government is silencing all of the independent voices in the nation under the guise of defense and security.

One of the most egregious cases of 2022, was the murder of a 24-year-old journalist and human rights defender, well-known LGBTI activist Avaz Shikhmammadov popularly known as Avaz Hafizli. On February 22, he was stabbed to death near the capital of Azerbaijan. Numerous requests to protect his life were ignored by Azerbaijan's law enforcement agencies. As the actual perpetrator of the crime was sentenced to the minimum prescribed sentence, genuine justice has not been served to this day. Attempts were made on the life of investigative journalist Ayten Mammadova and a blogger, Mammad Mirzali living in exile. Over the past year, dozens of journalists received death threats, and many were arrested on defamatory and other trumped-up charges. Since the beginning of 2022, a new repressive law on the media came into force, which significantly narrowed the already limited space for critics of the government and whistleblowers of corruption.

The most recent example of the government's intolerance for autonomous civic action in the nation is the arrest and ongoing detention of Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, a well-known civil society activist in Azerbaijan. B. Hajiyev has endured years of harassment and retaliation, including criminal charges, threats, and physical violence, like many other activists, human rights defenders, and journalists. He was kidnapped and subjected to horrific abuse just last year, but the Azerbaijani government has yet to carry out a thorough investigation or punish those responsible. In light of this, B. Hajiyev's ongoing imprisonment and repeated denials to turn it into a constraint measure are both inappropriate and, in any case, out of proportion to the charges leveled against him. It should be mentioned that Bakhtiyar Hajiyev is conducting a hunger strike and his health is in a critical state.

Already in December 2022, the United States of America State Department reaffirmed its call for the release of the imprisoned human rights campaigner. On February 3, 2023, Dunja Mijatović, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe issued a statement encouraging the Azerbaijani authorities to urgently free B. Hajiyev and grant him complete access to the medical care he requires. According to her, the Azerbaijani government should change course and seek to establish a secure and supportive environment for the activities of human rights defenders based on sincere communication and collaboration.

Another well-known case was the arrest on September 10, 2022, of journalist Avaz Zeynalli on trumped-up charges. A day later the authorities detained another journalist Elnur Shukurov. Later on, the authorities imposed a 4-months arrest on Zeynalli and Shukurov.

The Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) regrettably informs that many other investigative journalists and human rights defenders are still languishing in the country's prisons, including journalist Abid Gafarov imprisoned on fabricated defamation charges, and former political prisoner, blogger Rashad Ramazanov. Many former political prisoners also receive threats of criminal prosecution from the authorities. The authorities are also continuing to persecute their critics outside of Azerbaijan.

Among the political prisoners is also Elchin Mammad, an Azerbaijani journalist and human rights lawyer. He was arrested in March 2020 and sentenced to four years in prison shortly after he published a report critical of the human rights situation in the country. In January 2023, he has been included in the list of 16 individuals the United States of America Department of State highlighted as part of its campaign entitled the Without Just Cause Initiative.

The UN Human Rights Council is seen by the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) as playing a crucial and ongoing role in upholding and defending the rights and freedoms of human rights defenders worldwide. The Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) believes that the rights of Azerbaijani human rights defenders, as well as human rights and basic freedoms in that country in general, should be constantly in the focus of attention of the UNHRC, and should continue to be protected as one of the Council's top priorities in the near future.

The Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) urges this Council to call upon the Azerbaijani government to respect its international commitments and obligations, release all the political prisoners in the country, and provide basic conditions for the normal functioning of civil society.

The Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) holds the opinion that if the government of Azerbaijan fails to release all the political prisoners in the country, and continues its policy of stifling civil society, the UN Human Rights Council could establish the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Azerbaijan in line with the procedures already established in relation of Belarus on June 28, 2012, in its resolution 20/13.
