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Azerbaijan: release of activists welcome but more needed

The release of wrongfully imprisoned activists in Azerbaijan is a step in the right direction, but more is needed to transform the climate of fear and repression in Azerbaijan, Amnesty International said today.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev signed a decree on 16 March to mark the Nowruz new year holiday, pardoning more than 400 people including youth activists and opposition politicians unjustly imprisoned on trumped-up charges. Those released include long-term prisoners of conscience imprisoned solely for the exercise of their right to freedom of expression: youth group NIDA member **Ilkin Rustamzade** who had been jailed since 2013 for government criticism; and youth activists **Bayram Mammadov** and **Giays Ibrahimov**, jailed since 2016 for a critical graffiti message on the statue of Azerbaijan's former President Heydar Aliyev.

The released also include the prisoner of conscience and deputy chairman of the opposition Popular Front Party in Azerbaijan, **Fuad Garhamanli**. He was jailed in 2017 on charges including appeals to mass violence, merely for publishing Facebook commentary in which he criticized the authorities' handling of the security operations in the Azerbaijani village of Nardaran.

While Amnesty International is delighted to see the unjustly imprisoned activists reunited with their families, the move does little to change the overall landscape of repression in Azerbaijan. According to the local human rights groups, this year's Nowruz pardon included 51 prisoners who were jailed on politically motivated charges. Local human rights groups say that at least 74 more unjustly jailed activists, journalists and opposition politicians remain behind bars. Azerbaijan still retains repressive legislation which makes it almost impossible for civil society groups to operate, including burdensome NGO registration and funding requirements. Azerbaijan remains closed to human rights scrutiny, as international human rights monitors, including Amnesty International, continue to be denied access to the country.

Azerbaijan must ensure that all those still behind bars and convicted following unfair trials have their convictions quashed and are either immediately released or, where there is sufficient evidence of their criminal responsibility for internationally recognised offences, are re-tried in proceedings that meet international fair trial standards. Azerbaijan must also reform its legislation and allow civil society groups to operate freely, including by repealing burdensome registration and funding requirements. The authorities in Baku must further

allow international human rights monitors, including Amnesty International, to access the country.

Azerbaijan's international partners, including the EU, must keep up pressure to ensure that the authorities follow up this release with wider human rights reforms to transform the landscape of fear and repression in the country.