

Date: 11/01/2019

Escalating repression against Mehman Huseynov: Call for action from the international community

We 41 human rights organisations from 13 Human Rights Houses call for urgent action from the international community to ensure the life, health, and rights of imprisoned Azerbaijani photojournalist, video blogger, and human rights defender Mehman Huseynov. We are deeply concerned about his critical condition and his imprisonment, and the psychological pressure and new criminal charges pursued against him. We urge the international community to raise this case as a priority in communications with the Azerbaijani authorities and show public support for Mehman Huseynov.

Mehman Huseynov began a hunger strike on 26 December 2018 in protest against facing further criminal charges – charges that we and many others, [including the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights](#), consider to not be credible. Since 2012, Mehman Huseynov has been [subject to a travel ban](#) and without identification and official documentation, preventing him from accessing public services such as healthcare and education. He has also faced harassment and pressure, but actions against him have escalated dramatically in the past two years, beginning with reports that he was [abducted](#) and [tortured](#) in police custody on 9 January 2017.

Following this abduction, Mehman Huseynov reported that he was tortured – which is consistent with the findings of an examination by an independent team of medical doctors, sent from Front Line Defenders and the Georgian Centre of Psychological and Medical Rehabilitation for Torture. He was [sentenced to two years in prison](#) for defamation on 3 March 2017 for stating that he was tortured. We regret that he was imprisoned when he should have received support and his allegations of abduction and torture investigated. Still in prison, he now faces new criminal charges for alleged violence against a member of prison staff. We are particularly concerned about the credibility of this allegation, in context of previous arbitrary actions against Mehman Huseynov – and indications that since August 2018 he has been [under psychological pressure in prison](#) and the basis laid for further charges against him.

The actions taken against Mehman Huseynov appear to be politically motivated and strongly linked to his legitimate work raising awareness of human rights and issues related to corruption. These actions have led directly to his current severe condition, as with seemingly [no access to justice](#) and arbitrary restriction of his freedom, Mehman Huseynov saw no other option than to go on hunger strike on 26 December 2018. Further contributing to his condition, we note that while Mehman Huseynov was allowed to attend his late Mother’s funeral in August 2018, he was prevented from visiting her while she was alive and ill in hospital – on accusations that he has not participated in “corrective work”, namely the prison’s “social life”, “cultural events”, and “maintenance work.” These accusations also surfaced during Mehman Huseynov’s [hearing on application for parole](#) in August 2018. During the hearing, Mehman Huseynov told that he had been summoned by the prison administration and made to understand that he could be punished for explaining rights to other prisoners. He explained that he decided to stay apart from others for this reason. We worry that the decision by authorities to prevent Mehman Huseynov from visiting his dying mother has taken its toll on him.

Years of escalating pressure by authorities has forced an ambitious young man wanting to improve Azerbaijani society to now be in a critical condition in prison. This is a situation that has gone too far, for both Mehman Huseynov and for Azerbaijan.

With urgency, we call on the international community to raise the following with Azerbaijani authorities in support of Mehman Huseynov.

- Mehman Huseynov needs to be transferred to a civilian hospital to be examined by independent medical professionals – with treatment of his health taking utmost priority.
- His right to visits and meetings with his lawyers and family members must be respected, and the international community must be allowed to visit him. We caution against reports being disseminated by Azerbaijani officials with regard to a “monitoring group of NGOs” named the “National Preventive Group of the Azerbaijani Ombudsman” visiting Mehman Huseynov in prison. While this visit has taken place, we hold that these NGOs are not independent of the authorities.
- The prosecution service must drop the new criminal charges put forward under 317.2 of the Azerbaijan Criminal Code as they lack credibility.
- Mehman Huseynov must be released from prison at the latest when his sentence for defamation ends on 2 March 2019.
- The escalation against Mehman Huseynov has an aim, and that is to silence him. We are particularly worried that the next step for the authorities may be to take measures aimed at silencing Mehman Huseynov more permanently, pressuring him by offering to drop the charges against him in return for him leaving Azerbaijan for exile or signing that he will put an end to his legitimate work, as this has been the issue in previous cases. We fear such measures

may be put to him under duress and while he may be in a diminished capacity to make decisions. He must not be forced to take such action, and he needs protection from the international community in this regard.

- Human rights lawyers in Azerbaijan must be protected and free to do their work without pressure, harassment or retaliation. As outlined in a June 2017 Human Rights Council resolution, lawyers must be able to “discharge their functions freely, independently and without any fear of reprisal”. This is not the case in Azerbaijan, where lawyers who take politically sensitive cases face threats and disbarment. The result is that only a handful of human rights lawyers remain licensed to practice from the Bar Association of Azerbaijan. One lawyer representing Mehman Huseynov was suspended from the Bar in 2018. We are deeply concerned the same actions may be taken in retaliation against the two lawyers continuing to represent Mehman Huseynov. They need protection from the international community.

We also ask members of the international community to:

- Visit Mehman Huseynov in prison to enquire and report directly on his condition, challenging the Azerbaijani authorities to ensure that such visits are possible.
- Show public support for Mehman Huseynov and publicly respond to the new charges.

The following member organisations from the network Human Rights Houses call for support from the international to ensure the life, health, and rights of Mehman Huseynov.

Human Rights House Azerbaijan (signed by these member NGOs):

- Election Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center
- Legal Education Society
- Women’s Association for Rational Development (WARD)

Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House, Vilnius (signed by these member NGOs):

- Belarusian PEN Centre
- Viasna Human Rights Centre

Human Rights House Belgrade (signed by these member NGOs):

- Belgrade Centre for Human Rights
- Gradjanske (Civic Initiatives)
- Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia

Educational Human Rights House Chernihiv (signed by these member NGOs):

- Ahalar
- Almenda
- Association of Ukrainian human rights monitors on Law Enforcement
- East-SOS
- Chernihiv public committee of human rights protection
- Human Rights Information Centre
- MART
- No Borders Project
- Postup
- Transcarpathian Public Center
- Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union

Human Rights House Crimea (signed by these member NGOs):

- Almenda
- Crimean Human Rights Group
- Human Rights Information Centre
- Regional Centre for Human Rights

Human Rights House Oslo (signed by these member NGOs):

- Den norske Burmakomiteé (The Norwegian Burma Committee)
- Fellestrådet for Afrika (The Norwegian Council for Africa)
- Health and Human Rights Info
- Human Rights House Foundation
- Kvinnefronten (The Women’s Front)

Human Rights House Tbilisi (signed by these member NGOs):

- Article 42 of the Constitution
- Georgian Centre for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Torture Victims (GCRT)
- Human Rights Centre (HRIDC)
- Media Institute

- Sapari

Human Rights House Voronezh (signed by these member NGOs):

- Interregional Human Rights Group (Voronezh)
- Charitable Foundation "International Project - Youth Human Rights Movement"

Human Rights House Zagreb (signed by these member NGOs):

- Association for Promotion of Equal Opportunities (APEO)
- B.a.B.e. (Be active. Be emancipated.)
- Center for Peace Studies
- Croatian Platform for International Citizen Solidarity - CROSOL
- Documenta - Center for Dealing with the Past

Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Poland

Index on Censorship, United Kingdom

Rafto Foundation for Human Rights, Norway

Russian Research Centre for Human Rights, Russia