

PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

AZERBAIJAN: Prosecutor requests outrageous jail sentences for Leyla and Arif Yunus

Paris-Geneva, August 7, 2015 – Yesterday the fourth hearing in the case against Leyla Yunus and Arif Yunusov took place, and it proved to be yet another example of how the Azeri regime makes a mockery of justice, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders said today.

On August 6, the Prosecutor asked the Baku Grave Crimes Court to sentence **Leyla Yunus**, Director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy (IPD) and a member of OMCT General Assembly, to 11 years in jail, while 9 years were requested for her husband **Arif Yunusov**, Head of the Conflictology Department of IPD. The next hearing is scheduled for August 10, when defence lawyers are expected to make their final plea.

Ms. Yunus is wrongfully accused of large scale fraud (Article 178.3.2 of the Azerbaijan Criminal Code), fake manufacturing or selling of official documents (Articles 320.1 and 320.2), large scale tax evasion (Article 213.2.2) and illegal business with extraction of income in large size (Article 192.2.1). Mr. Yunusov is accused of large-scale fraud (Article 178.3.2).

“Since the end of the Baku Games, the repression against critic voices amongst the Azeri civil society has intensified. Authorities have recently confirmed harsh jail sentences for human rights defenders such as Rasul Jafarov and Intigam Aliyev, in speedy appeal hearings. We fear that Leyla and Arif will face the same fate”. FIDH Honorary President Souhayr Belhassen said today. ***“Shamelessly, Azerbaijan is fast moving towards a full-blown dictatorship”.***

On July 27, around 25 local and international observers and journalists were prevented from entering the courtroom, including the Observatory's judicial observer, a number of diplomats, as well as journalists from the BBC, to mention a few. The hearing was held in the smallest courtroom in the Courthouse, although some of the larger ones were available at the time. The same happened in the hearing of August 3.

“We are dismayed about this new trend which is extremely evident in the hearings following the European Games, namely denying international observers access to the courtroom or undermining their effective independent monitoring presence by not allowing in their interpreters, which amounts to a serious violation of the principles of transparency and publicity of judicial debates”. OMCT Secretary General Gerald Staberock added.

Similar limitations have recently taken place in the trials against other emblematic human rights defenders, such as the first hearing in the case of investigative journalist **Khadija Ismayilova**, as well as the appeal hearings in the case against **Rasul Jafarov**.

Our organisations call on the Azerbaijan authorities to put an end to this crackdown on civil society and to release all human rights defenders detained in the country, including Leyla and Arif.

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