

## PRESS RELEASE – THE OBSERVATORY

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### **AZERBAIJAN: Gold medal on repression in the run-up to the Baku Games**

***Geneva, June 11, 2015 – On the eve of the opening of the first European Games taking place in Baku, the Azeri government keeps ignoring the international call for release of jailed human rights defenders and journalists.***

The crackdown on Azeri civil society, NGOs and journalists has particularly escalated over the past year, as the date of the Baku European Games approached<sup>1</sup>. The result of such a massive repression is the arbitrary arrest and detention on trumped-up charges of several human rights defenders and journalists, among whom: **Leyla Yunus**<sup>2</sup>, member of OMCT General Assembly, **Arif Yusunov**<sup>3</sup>, **Intigam Aliyev**<sup>4</sup>, **Rasul Jafarov**<sup>5</sup>, **Khadija Ismayilova**<sup>6</sup>, **Hilal Mammadov**, **Anar Mammadli** and **Rauf Mirqadirov**.

**“It is difficult to understand that the Baku Games could be business as usual for the sporting community when the Azeri government’s behavior is as far as it could be from the Olympic principles. A paradigmatic example is that defenders like our colleague Leyla Yunus remain imprisoned despite their deteriorating health condition due to the refusal of Azerbaijan to at least release them on humanitarian grounds. Moreover, it is important to highlight that the repression seems to be a strategy closely linked with the celebration of the Games in Baku in order to prevent criticism from spoiling the event as it happened with the Eurovision contest”**, declared Gerald Staberock, OMCT Secretary General.

On May 28, 2015, Members of the European Parliament from all political groups issued a joint statement calling for the unconditional release of political prisoners in Azerbaijan before the starting of the first edition of the European Games. In the document, they stressed that "the label 'European' should be given meaning, in the sense that the European Games should take place while human rights and fundamental freedoms are respected"<sup>7</sup>.

On June 3, 2015, the Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of Media and the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders signed a joint statement calling for athletes to take a stand on human rights issues in Azerbaijan<sup>8</sup>.

Following the aforementioned public statements as well as the mobilisation of Sport For Rights Campaign, an initiative raising the issue of political prisoners in the context of the forthcoming international sporting events in Azerbaijan, of which OMCT and FIDH are members, the first statement from the sport world arrived from Germany.

On June 4, 2015, the German Olympic Sports Confederation called upon the Azeri authorities to free Azerbaijani jailed activists before the European Games. Furthermore, top

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<sup>1</sup> See the Fact-Finding Mission Report of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (joint OMCT-FIDH programme) available at <http://www.omct.org/human-rights-defenders/reports-and-publications/azerbaijan/2015/04/d23097/> and <https://www.fidh.org/International-Federation-for-Human-Rights/eastern-europe-central-asia/azerbaijan/azerbaijan-repression-escalates-in-run-up-to-european-games>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.omct.org/human-rights-defenders/urgent-interventions/azerbaijan/2015/02/d23001/>.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.omct.org/human-rights-defenders/statements/azerbaijan/2015/02/d22993/>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.omct.org/human-rights-defenders/statements/azerbaijan/2015/04/d23102/>.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.omct.org/human-rights-defenders/statements/azerbaijan/2015/04/d23093/>.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.omct.org/human-rights-defenders/urgent-interventions/azerbaijan/2015/05/d23140/>.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.ulrike-lunacek.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Joint-Statement-Azerbaijan.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> See <https://opendemocracy.net/nils-mui%20C5%BEnieks-michel-forst-dunja-mijatovi%20C4%87/sport-cannot-ignore-human-rights>.

officials of Germany and members of the government announced on the same day that they would not attend the opening ceremony of the Baku Games.

The Observatory welcomes the steps forward taken by some major political and sports stakeholders, and hopes that this will be of example for others to take a stand for human rights in Azerbaijan, and to join the call for the immediate and unconditional release of all arbitrarily jailed human rights defenders and journalists.

**“The Observatory calls on all European States to condition their presence at the opening of the Baku Games to the release of all imprisoned human rights defenders. The recent events with Amnesty International’s delegation being barred entry to the country<sup>9</sup> and UK human rights campaigner Emma Hughes being detained, red-listed and deported upon her arrival in Baku Airport<sup>10</sup> just two days ahead of the opening of the Games should effectively be the last straw and should trigger a strong reaction by other European States”,** declared Karim Lahidji, FIDH President.

Our organizations once again strongly condemn the ongoing Azeri crackdown on civil society and arbitrary detention of several human rights defenders and journalists, as they only aim at sanctioning their human rights work and freedom of expression.

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<sup>9</sup> See Amnesty International’s public statement available at : <https://www.amnesty.org/en/articles/news/2015/06/amnesty-international-barred-from-baku-ahead-of-european-games>.

<sup>10</sup> See Platform’s press release available at: <http://platformlondon.org/p-pressreleases/azerbaijan-emma-hughes-detained/>.