

April 13, 2015

The Honorable John F. Kerry
U.S. Department of State
2201 C St., NW
Washington, DC

Dear Secretary Kerry:

We are alarmed by the deteriorating human rights situation in Azerbaijan. Arrests and detentions of journalists, civil society and human rights activists, religious believers, and opposition figures have multiplied; Azerbaijan now has twice as many political prisoners as Russia and Belarus combined. The government has targeted domestic and foreign NGOs and raided the office of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Senior government officials have engaged in an ugly anti-Western campaign. All of this raises serious concerns about the future of U.S.-Azerbaijani relations and doubts about the government of Azerbaijan's commitment to comply with its international obligations as signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Open Government Partnership as well as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, and its membership in the OSCE and Council of Europe. Attached please find an Open Letter detailing our concerns and steps that should be taken to address the situation, signed by 45 activists, experts, organizations, and former officials on both sides of the Atlantic.

The formation of a new bilateral commission on civil society, we believe, does not justify further delay in responding to the Azerbaijani government's abysmal treatment of its own people. Official expressions of concern about the human rights situation over the last many months have not yielded results, and there is no reason to think the commission will change that trajectory unless it is paired with penalties for ongoing human rights abuses. Thus, the U.S. should:

- Impose a visa ban and asset freeze on senior Azerbaijani government officials responsible for and involved in gross human rights abuses.
- Block trade promotion assistance—Export-Import Bank and OPIC support—to Azerbaijani state-owned entities.

For years, Azerbaijan's importance as an energy supplier and partner on security and counter-terrorism has outweighed attention to its deplorable human rights record. The growing repression during the past year, however, has now made such an approach especially untenable. With parliamentary elections scheduled for later this year, we fear the situation will only get worse unless the West takes decisive action.

We believe that the United States should inform the government of Azerbaijan that it needs to take the following steps in order to secure withdrawal of these sanctions and avoid potentially more serious actions in the future:

- Release all political prisoners and those imprisoned for practicing their non-violent religious beliefs and grant them full political rehabilitation.
- Cease harassment and intimidation of family members of opposition activists, human rights defenders, and their lawyers.
- Respect the rights of journalists to do their job unhindered.
- End the campaign against domestic and foreign non-governmental organizations and stop the push for legislation that would restrict the activities and funding of NGOs.
- Create the conditions for free and fair parliamentary elections later this year.
- Permit foreign broadcasters to resume operations without fear of state harassment and raids.

We hope that Azerbaijan will succeed as a democratic state fully integrated into the international community. We hope that stronger ties will develop between Azerbaijan and countries in the West. We support efforts to resolve peacefully the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. But none of this is possible as long as Azerbaijan continues down the authoritarian path it is currently on. The government of Azerbaijan cannot be both a respected member of the international community and a repressive, kleptocratic autocracy. It must choose.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Ambassador Morton Abramowitz (Ret.)

Elliott Abrams
Former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy and Human Rights

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