

Azerbaijan: Travel Ban for Activist's Family

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Matanat Azizova seen as latest casualty in campaign against dissenting voices.

Prosecutors in Azerbaijan have prevented the family of women's rights defender Matanat Azizova from leaving the country, in what supporters say is an attempt to force her to return.

Azizova, who heads the Women's Crisis Centre in Baku, was questioned by prosecutors on May 2, and left Azerbaijan the next day.

"At the moment, in the interests of Matanat Azizova's security, we are keeping the country where she is located confidential," Azizova's legal representative Samira Agayeva said.

The focus of prosecutors' questioning was Rauf Mirqadirov, a journalist arrested on April 21 on espionage charges. Mirqadirov was deported from Turkey and arrested on arrival in Baku. The Azerbaijani prosecution service claimed he had been spying for Armenia since 2008. His lawyer says he views the allegation as absurd. (See [Azerbaijani Journalist Accused of Spying for Armenia](#).)

As they build a case, prosecutors have questioned many leading independent voices, including rights activist Leyla Yunus, who heads the Institute for Peace and Democracy, Ayna-Zerkalo newspaper editor Elchin Shikhli, journalist Uzeyir Jafarov, and others. (See [Leading Rights Activist Questioned in Azerbaijan](#).)

Agayeva said prosecutors put considerable pressure on Azizova during the interrogation.

"They questioned her for eight hours. They tried to get Matanat Azizova to give evidence against Rauf Mirqadirov and Leyla Yunus," she said. "The head of the investigative department proposed 'cooperation', and promised that her Women's Crisis Centre would receive official registration."

On May 6, prosecutors together with officers of the Ministry of National Security searched Azizova's home and took away laptops, flash drives, video cassettes, CDs and documents.

At a May 23 press conference, Azizova's mother Mirvari Gahramanli, who is head of the Committee for the Protection of Oil Workers' Rights, said prosecutors tried to coerce Azizova into giving evidence against Yunus.

"My daughter left the country because of this pressure. Now the government is trying to gain revenge on my daughter by holding her son and husband hostage," she said.

On May 21, Azizova's husband Eldar and her son Jamal were detained on the border with Georgia.

Frontier guards told them that prosecutors had issued orders banning them from leaving the country.

Agayeva said these instructions were unlawful.

"Prosecutors do not have powers to bar a citizen from leaving the country. Under Azerbaijani legislation, this can only be done by court order. There is no court order in relation to Eldar and Jamal Azizov, only verbal instructions from the prosecutor," she said.

Yunus told the same press conference that she had advised Azizova to leave Azerbaijan.

"She did not run away. I am a member of the Frontline organisation whose human rights activists have a protection programme. I recommended that Matanat protect herself," Yunus said. "Matanat is just a witness in this court case."

She added, "All this is taking place while the Council of Europe's secretary general is in Baku. On the one hand, the Council of Europe is signing an agreement with the justice ministry on the development of democracy, and on the other, there is this disgraceful action."

Azerbaijan is beginning a six-month term as chair of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

IWPR made repeated attempts to get Eldar Sultanov, spokesman for the chief prosecutor's office, to comment on these matters, but he declined.

A senior figure in the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan party, Mubariz Gurbanli, told the ANS news agency that the furore over Azizova was no more than an attempt to undermine due process.

“Rauf Mirqadirov was arrested for reason that are well known reasons, and the investigation into this case continues. Witnesses are being invited to give evidence,” Gurbanli said. “One of them [Yunus] turns it into a performance, while another flees the country. They are interfering with the course of this case, yet supposedly they’re being pressured.”

Mustafa Hajibeyli, an adviser to the head of the opposition Musavat party, said the authorities were engaged in an all-out campaign to silence dissent.

“All democratic institutions are under pressure. The government is trying to force its political opponents, the press, and non-government organisations into silence,” he said. “They have already partially achieved this.”

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