

Detained Azeri Youth Activists on Hunger Strike

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"We do not expect pity," says one of eight defendants who deny prosecution allegations of "revolution" plot.

Eight youth activists who have been in custody in Azerbaijan since March 2013 have declared a hunger strike while they await a verdict in the case against them.

The prosecution case in the trial of the NIDA movement finished on April 17, with prosecutors seeking sentences of between six and eight years.

The eight defendants – Rashadat Akhundov, Rashad Hasanov, Bakhtiyar Guliyev, Shahin Novruzlu, Mammad Azizov, Zaur Qurbanli, Uzeyir Mammadli and Ilkin Rustamzade – immediately went on hunger strike and demanded that the judge acquit them.

In a closing statement made on behalf of all the defendants on May 1, Akhundov said, "The last word has not been spoken yet. The NIDA members sitting here will soon say their last word. We will not surrender the truth either inside or outside prison. The years stolen from our lives will not be lost in vain."

Prosecutors say that a search of the activists' homes revealed drugs, Molotov cocktails and large amounts of foreign currency. The official account mixed allegations of a "Facebook revolution" plot with suggestions that NIDA members youth group planned to engage in violence, and hints that unspecified foreign powers were behind this.

The eight deny all the charges against them.

The arrests came after NIDA was involved in street protests about a series of deaths of army conscripts, which gained considerable traction among otherwise apolitical Azerbaijanis.

In a letter brought out by his lawyer on April 27, Hasanov said, "The hunger strike which we began ten days ago continues. If anyone – even members of my family or my lawyers – says I have ended my hunger strike, don't believe them. I will carry on all the way."

At the end of his letter, Hasanov addressed other young people in Azerbaijan, saying, "You're next. We can't do anything any more, and you can't influence us by telling us you need us. As I have always said, fear nothing and no one."

On April 28, Guliyev's lawyer, Asabali Mustafayev, said his client's health had deteriorated, and the others were trying unsuccessfully to convince him to take food.

"The others, too, are beginning to feel worse. Mammad Azizov is very weak, but he intends to continue to the end. They don't want to be examined or treated," Mustafayev told reporters.

A spokesman for the prison service told IWPR that the hunger strike did not count as "official", because the detainees had not informed prison staff.

"None of them has come to the detention centre management with an official statement. If they make a statement, then we will separate them and have them monitored by a doctor," the spokesman said. "There is no reason to worry about them. They are eating normally in their cells and we see no problems with their health."

Hunger strikes have a history in Azerbaijan.

In 2007, Faina Kungurova, a member of the opposition Azerbaijan Democratic Party, was detained – initially for "looking suspicious" near a road along which President Ilham Aliyev's car was travelling. She was later jailed on a drugs possession charge. She denied any wrongdoing, went on hunger strike and died three weeks later.

In 2009, Baku resident Sayyara Heydarova was sentenced to four-and-a-half-years for disorderly conduct. She insisted she was innocent and refused food for 58 days, at which point an appeals courts suspended her sentence.

Arif Hajili, chief of staff at the opposition Musavat party, once staged a hunger strike for 11 days himself, and told IWPR how hard it was to refuse food.

"In prison conditions, it's twice as hard, and they have shown real dedication by going on hunger strike

there,” he said. “These young people mobilised Azerbaijani society against lawlessness and an anti-democratic government. By campaigning on soldiers’ deaths, they gave a real push to the democratic struggle. The government got scared and invented some lies so as to arrest them.”

The NIDA activists won no sympathy from Siyavush Novruzov, deputy head of the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan party.

“The legal process hasn’t even finished yet. The court hasn’t returned a verdict and no one knows what that decision will be,” he said. “They themselves, members of their families, and certain political and public figures are employing various techniques to pressure the court.... If they disagree with the court’s decision and think it is unfair, they have the right of appeal and they can exercise that. If they cannot get what they want from local courts, they can appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.”

A verdict in the NIDA case is expected on May 6.

In his closing remarks, Akhundov said, “We do not expect pity. Azerbaijan is a massive prison and we are all prisoners. How can one slave help another?”

Sevinj Telmanqizi reports for the Yeni Musavat newspaper in Azerbaijan.

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