

Leading Rights Activist Questioned in Azerbaijan

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Leyla Yunus stopped at airport as authorities widen net in “Armenian espionage” case.

Leyla Yunus, Azerbaijan’s leading human rights activist, has been detained at Baku airport and brought back for questioning about her ties to a journalist who has been charged with espionage.

Yunus, director of the Institute of Peace and Democracy, was questioned for several hours on April 29 by investigators from the prosecution service department for grave crimes.

She said prosecutors asked her exclusively about Rauf Mirqadirov, a journalist who has been charged with spying for Armenia. See [Azerbaijani Journalist Accused of Spying for Armenia](#) on the case of Mirqadirov, who was detained on April 19 in Turkey, where he is resident, and sent to Baku.

“I said that yes, we’re friends, that we have a good relationship,” she told journalists, noting that she had not been formally charged. Prosecutors wanted her to agree not to leave Baku, but she refused to sign the relevant document.

Yunus was detained together with her husband Arif late on April 28 at Baku’s airport. Mehman Aliyev, head of the Turan news agency, who drove the couple to the airport, said they arrived there at ten in the evening.

“The first secretary from the French embassy and the charge d’affaires of the United States embassy were with them. They had been invited to an event in Brussels and were on their way there. But at passport control, their passports were taken away and they were told they couldn’t leave the country,” Aliyev told IWPR. “After the diplomats spoke to various government figures, their passports were stamped and they were told they could fly.

“But then they barred them again, and at around 11.15pm Leyla Yunus called me and told me that four people in plainclothes were searching their suitcases, and that another search would take place in their flat and at their office.”

Arif Yunus felt increasingly unwell, and was taken to a city hospital, where doctors said his blood pressure was dangerously high.

Back at their apartment, Leyla Yunus insisted that a minimum of four of her friends should be present during the police search.

“I have four rooms. There must be one person in each room so they don’t plant drugs or other things there,” she said, according to journalists who were present.

Leyla Yunus asked to use the toilet, and eventually went to a neighbour’s flat, but a male policeman accompanied her into the toilet.

“This is a disgrace. How can they humiliate someone like this? I am a 60-year-old woman and a policeman was watching while I sat on the toilet,” she told the journalists after returning to her flat.

The police eventually took away computer hard drives and various documents.

On April 29, the prosecutor general’s office issued a statement confirming that Yunus had been detained. The statement said that Leyla and Arif Yunus had repeatedly failed to respond to requests to come in for questioning, delivered both on paper and by telephone.

“At around 11pm on April 28, Leyla and Arif Yunus, assisted by diplomats from various foreign embassies, came to Heydar Aliyev International Airport with the intention of leaving the country,” the prosecution statement said. “Their attempt to avoid investigation by flying out of the country ... was stopped.”

Yunus believes the government has moved against her in a bid to halt her human rights activism.

“I say there are political prisoners in Azerbaijan, and President Ilham Aliyev says there aren’t. I defend the rights of people who lose their homes,” she said. “And now they are putting psychological pressure on me; they have no shame. My husband is between life and death, but I will denounce them all the way. Nothing scares me.”

A spokeswoman for the French embassy said that Leyla Yunus was given a four-year visa on April 28.

Government supporters in parliament reject any political connection to Yunus's questioning, and suggested that her links with France were suspicious, without explaining why.

"The granting of a long-term visa to activist Leyla Yunus and her husband Arif, and the fact they were accompanied to the airport by representatives of foreign embassies, raise certain questions," Mubariz Gurbanli, deputy head of the governing Yeni Azerbaijan party, told the Trend magazine.

Gurbanli also questioned Yunus's defence of Mirqadirov, asking, "Why are they drawing so much attention to this issue, making a fuss and not waiting for the results of the investigation?"

The prosecution service rests its treason allegations against Mirqadirov on a claim that he passed sensitive state information to Laura Baghdasaryan, who heads a research centre in Armenia. Mirqadirov's lawyer Fuad Agayev says his client regards the espionage claim as absurd.

Elchin Shikhli, editor-in-chief of Ayna-Zerkalo, for which Mirqadirov is a columnist, said, "Only someone who has access to state secrets can betray them. Rauf is not an official, nor is he someone with access to secrets, so this is totally incomprehensible to me."

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