



Azerbaijan: Harassment of writer must end

19 December 2018 – The Azerbaijani authorities must stop their harassment of writer, poet and playwright Akram Aylisli, PEN International said today, as the renowned Azerbaijani author is once again prevented from attending an international literary event in Switzerland in January 2019. Eighty-one year old Akram Aylisli is facing up to three years in prison on trumped-up charges and is subjected to a travel ban.

Akram Aylisli was a popular writer in Azerbaijan until the publication in 2012 of his novel *Stone Dreams*, on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, made him the target of the Azerbaijani authorities. He was detained on 30 March 2016 at Heydar Aliyev airport in Azerbaijan's capital Baku, as he attempted to travel to Italy where he was due to speak at a literary festival. He was subsequently accused of creating a public disturbance and assaulting a border official, which he denies.

Akram Aylisli was charged with hooliganism under Article 221.1 of Azerbaijan's Criminal Code on 6 April 2016. Charges were upgraded to resisting the authorities with violence under Article 315.1 of the Criminal Code on 22 April 2016. This came after he wrote a letter to Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, suggesting that it was absurd that a 78-year-old man could assault a young border control guard, and asking for charges against him to be dropped. Two and half years later, he is yet to be tried and he risks up to three years in prison if convicted.

'This ludicrous case against Akram Aylisli has been ongoing for nearly three years. His persecution is another stark example of how the Azerbaijani authorities intimidate and harass critical voices. Justice delayed is justice denied. These farcical charges against him must be dropped immediately' said **Carles Torner, Executive Director of PEN International.**

According to Akram Aylisli's lawyer, the alleged incident qualifies as a minor offence and as such, the preliminary investigation should have been concluded within nine months, in line with Article 218.10.2 of Azerbaijan's Code of Criminal Procedure.

Shortly after being detained, Akram Aylisli signed a document compelling him to remain in Baku, thereby subjecting to a local and international travel ban. Since then, he has been unable to attend scores of cultural and literary events and to promote his books, including his latest opus *Farewell, Aylis*, published in the US on 21 November 2018.

As part of the investigation, the Prosecutor General's office confiscated Akram Aylisli's identity documents, which prevents him from accessing health care services. According to his family, he is in poor health and in need of medical care.

'Following reports that Akram Aylisli requires medical attention, we further call on Azerbaijan's authorities to immediately grant Akram Aylisli the medical care that he needs, including by allowing him to travel abroad to seek medical treatment', added Carles Torner.

Additional information

Akram Aylisli was one of Azerbaijan's most prominent writer, having been awarded the official title of People's Writer, as well as two of the highest state awards, the Shokrat and Istiglal medals.

Following the publication of his novel *Stone Dreams*, which tackled the issue of Azerbaijani-Armenian relations and included depictions of pogroms allegedly carried out by Azerbaijanis against Armenians in 1990, Akram Aylisli was stripped of his People's Writer title and his presidential pension. His books were burnt and a politician from a pro-government party offered a US\$13,000 reward to anyone who cut off one of his ears. His wife and son were both dismissed from their jobs. He was branded an apostate, expelled from the Union of Azerbaijani Writers while people organised rallies against him. His books were withdrawn from school curriculum and his plays were banned. At the same time, members of the Azerbaijani parliament discussed whether he should be expelled from Azerbaijan and his citizenship repealed, as well as whether he should undergo a DNA test to see if he is ethnically Armenian.

The [persecution of critical voices](#) in Azerbaijan continues unabated. The challenges they face are severe and frequent and include death threats, surveillance, politically-motivated arrests on spurious charges, extended pre-trial detentions and custodial sentences. Currently, dozens of journalists and activists are behind bars for exercising their right to free expression. There is a clear pattern of the Azerbaijani authorities using charges of drugs or firearms possession, 'hooliganism' or tax evasion to arrest and imprison writers and journalists who criticise the authorities. They continue to arbitrarily arrest individuals for engaging in dissent and release them as a mechanism of control. Released political prisoners are commonly unable to return to their previous work and political activities. Many have not had convictions quashed, are under surveillance, face travel bans and ongoing harassment.

Akram Aylisli was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014.

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