**Azerbaijan: Government Demolishes Human Rights Groups’ Offices**

**Despite Court Injunction, Building Razed and Most Contents Destroyed**

(Moscow) ­­– The Azerbaijani authorities, without warning, illegally demolished a building housing three leading human rights organizations in the capital, Baku, on August 11, 2011, Human Rights Watch said today. The government should immediately investigate responsibility for the building’s destruction, and promptly compensate the groups for all their losses, Human Rights Watch said.

“The government’s ruthless demolition of an office that serves as a hub for human rights activism in Azerbaijan sends a chilling message to all Azerbaijanis,” said Jane Buchanan, Europe and Central Asia senior researcher at Human Rights Watch. “These human rights organizations, which provided crucial support to victims of government abuse, as well as women in crisis and others in need, have lost nearly everything.”

Among the groups with offices in the building were the Institute for Peace and Democracy, the Azerbaijani Campaign to Ban Landmines, and the only women's crisis center in Baku. The building is owned by Leyla Yunus, a prominent human rights defender in Azerbaijan, and her husband.

An employee of the Institute for Peace and Democracy, Azad Isadze, told Human Rights Watch that he was in the building at around 8 p.m. when an official from the State Property Committee and an official from the Baku mayor’s office arrived. They indicated that heavy machinery would be destroying a neighboring building with which the building shared a wall, and encouraged Isadze to leave the premises for his safety. He refused to leave. Several minutes later, without warning, heavy machinery began destroying other parts of the organizations’ building. Government workers entered the building and began removing office furniture and equipment.

Isadze said that he asked the officials at the site to halt the demolition for a short period to allow time for him and local residents who had come to assist him to remove office equipment, documents, and personal belongings. The officials refused and ordered the demolition to go forward immediately. Isadze and the others left the building. By 10 p.m. the building was nearly completely destroyed. It is not known where the government workers took the property they removed from the building.

The building, at 38-1 and 2 Shamsi Badalbeili Street, had been identified by the Baku Mayor’s Office for expropriation and demolition in 2010. The Yunuses obtained an injunction in May 2011, from a local economic court prohibiting expropriation or demolition of the property pending a final court decision. Leyla Yunus had also filed numerous petitions to government agencies regarding other house expropriations and demolitions in Baku.

The demolition comes in the midst of a wider "beautification” campaign in central Baku that has cost hundreds – and possibly thousands – of homeowners and residents their homes and resulted in numerous illegal expropriations, forcible evictions, and home demolitions.

An article appeared in The New York Times earlier on August 11 on illegal demolitions in Baku that extensively quoted Yunus.

“This nighttime demolition, without warning or allowing the tenants to remove personal property, suggests that the authorities were looking to punish Yunus for her work defending people’s property,” Buchanan said. “It is particularly outrageous that the government would bring in the bulldozers in defiance of a court order and the rule of law.”

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