

[Azerbaijan: UN Working Group concerned at situation of human rights defenders](#)

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(**Update** - Geneva, 28 August 2014) - The UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights has expressed grave concern at restrictions on human rights defenders and non-governmental organisations working on issues of business and human rights in Azerbaijan.

The comments came after ISHR called on the Working Group to ensure that 'the situation and protection of human rights defenders' was 'the key priority' during the Group's first-ever mission to Azerbaijan, from 18 to 27 August.

In a [statement issued at the conclusion of the visit](#) and in advance of a detailed report to be submitted to the Human Rights Council in June 2015, the Working Group said, 'It is a matter of concern that a number of prominent civil society actors were placed in pre-trial detention just before our visit and that human rights organisations face problems with accessing bank accounts and registering'.

The Working Group statement also affirmed the importance of the work of human rights defenders to economic and social development, saying 'Free and vibrant social dialogue is critically important to the promotion of business and human rights. It allows different views to be aired to ensure well-informed policymaking. The Government must ensure that the legitimate and peaceful activities of human rights defenders are not obstructed'.

Welcoming the Working Group's statement, ISHR's Michael Ineichen said, 'In Azerbaijan and many other countries, human rights defenders face grave risks for their work to promote corporate responsibility and accountability. We urge the Working Group to ensure a strong focus on the situation of human rights defenders in country missions, communications and in all other aspects of its mandate and to speak out strongly against any restrictions or reprisals associated with their work.'

(Geneva) - A group of United Nations experts on business and human rights should raise serious concerns about the repression of civil society when they visit Azerbaijan this week, the International Service for Human Rights said today.

The UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights is conducting a [visit to Azerbaijan from 18 to 27 August](#) to examine implementation of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. The visit comes as Azerbaijan intensifies a year-long crackdown on human rights defenders and non-governmental organisations, including those working on issues of corporate transparency and accountability.

According to Human Rights Watch, in the last month alone [Azerbaijan has arrested at least four leading human rights defenders](#) on bogus charges, including prominent activists Leyla Yunus and Rasul Jafarov, while also imposing [financial sanctions on a number of individuals and organisations who work on issues of business and human rights](#).^[1] Earlier today, a group of UN [human rights experts condemned](#) the 'growing tendency to prosecute prominent human rights defenders in Azerbaijan' and urged the Government 'to reverse the trend of repression, criminalisation and prosecution of human rights work in the country'.

'Human rights defenders and non-governmental organisations have a vital role to play in promoting corporate respect for human rights and exposing and seeking accountability for corporate human rights violations. They should be protected and not persecuted for this work,' said Michael Ineichen of the International Service for Human Rights.

In June 2014, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a [significant resolution](#) which recognises 'the valuable role played by civil society, including non-governmental organisations, in promoting the implementation of the Guiding Principles and accountability for business-related human rights abuses'. This resolution complements the Guiding Principles themselves, which recognise the role of defenders in preventing, mitigating and seeking remedy for corporate human rights violations and stipulate that governments and businesses must not interfere with the important and legitimate activities of human rights defenders.

'In light of recent developments in the country, the situation and protection of human rights defenders should be the key priority for the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights during its mission to Azerbaijan,' Mr Ineichen said.

Globally, a number of recent reports have highlighted the serious threats and risks - from defamation, to judicial harassment, to arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial killings - that human rights defenders who work on issues related to [land and environment rights](#), the natural resources sector and [major development projects](#) face.

'Human rights defenders in oil-rich Azerbaijan face the double jeopardy of a repressive government and powerful, profit-driven non-State actors,' said Mr Ineichen.

'In the past the UN Working Group has been subject to some criticism that it has been insufficiently attentive to the situation of human rights defenders. The Group's visit to Azerbaijan presents both an opportunity and imperative to place the protection of human rights defenders at the heart of the business and human rights agenda,' he said.

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^[1] Including Gubad Ibadoglu, Elchin Abdullayev, Mirvari Gahramanli, the Economic Research Center, the Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Public Union and the Oil Workers' Rights Protection Organisation.