

PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

AZERBAIJAN: Verdict against Leyla and Arif Yunus is outrageous and must be nullified

Geneva-Paris, August 13, 2015 – The Observatory's trial observer in Baku reports that Leyla Yunus and Arif Yunusov have been handed 8.5 and 7 year jail sentences, respectively. The Baku Grave Crimes court pronounced the verdict after a speedy hearing of the defence's final pleas. These sentences are outrageous and aim purely at sanctioning the legitimate work of the two Azeri human rights defenders, declared the Observatory. While these heavy sentences are no surprise, they serve to further underline Azerbaijan's complete disregard for the international standards of fair trial and due process.

The trial against **Leyla Yunus** and **Arif Yunusov** opened less than one month ago. The couple faced charges of “large-scale fraud,” “forgery,” “tax evasion” and “illegal business.” The observer sent by our organisations was present at the trial from Day One. However she was abruptly denied entry to the courtroom today. Mr. Arif Yunusov fainted while making his final plea and required immediate medical attention. The judge condemned the two accused respectively to 8.5 years in jail for Ms. Yunus and 7 for Mr. Yunusov, directly following the end of the final hearing.

“The unprecedented speed with which the Yunus trial was carried out is appalling and tells us a lot about its quality. The judgement is full of inaccuracies due to a total lack of examination of the evidence provided. Violations of international standards of the right to a fair trial were obvious,” declared Gerald Staberock, Secretary General of OMCT. ***“It is a shameful verdict that was unfortunately foreseeable since the beginning of their pre-trial detention one year ago”*** he added.

Leyla Yunus, Director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy (IPD) and a member of OMCT General Assembly, and Arif Yunusov, Chief of IPD's department of conflictology, were arrested in the summer of 2014 as part of a large-scale crackdown against Azeri human rights defenders and civil society. During the past year in detention, the deterioration of their health has been appalling. Requests for access to the necessary medical treatment have been denied multiple times.

Leyla Yunus has lost at least 16 kg since her arrest. She also suffers from a severe case of diabetes. In addition, her cellmate has violently accosted her on a number of occasions. Nonetheless, no measures were taken by the penitentiary authorities to ensure her physical integrity. Arif Yunusov suffers from high blood pressure and has lost consciousness several times, including during the August 3 hearing which had to be adjourned when he had to be taken away in an ambulance. His lawyer declared that his client's health did not permit him to participate in the hearings any longer. However, this did not prevent the trial from continuing as scheduled.

The Observatory recalls that very similar and equally politically motivated sentences were already upheld in July 2015 after the appeal trials of human rights defenders **Intigam Aliyev** and **Rasul Jafarov**, who are currently serving 7.5 and 6.3 years in prison, respectively.

The Observatory also recalls that in addition to this trial, Leyla Yunus and Arif Yunusov still face charges of “state treason,” which will be the object of a separate, future trial.

“Our organisations strongly condemn today's sentences in the Yunus case, as well as all the previous sentences against other human rights defenders in the country. They only aimed to silence critical voices,” said FIDH Honorary President, Souhayr Belhassen. ***“We will continue to call for the authorities in Azerbaijan to immediately and***

unconditionally release the Yunus couple and all human rights defenders currently detained in Azerbaijan for their work," she added.

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (OBS) was created in 1997 by the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and FIDH. The objective of this programme is to intervene to prevent or remedy situations of repression against human rights defenders.

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