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PRESS RELEASE

Azerbaijan: Civil Society and the Media Out of Immediate Danger?

ARTICLE 19 welcomes a decision on 30 June by the parliament of Azerbaijan, the *Milli Mejlis*, not to adopt the most restrictive proposals in a package of legislative amendments governing civil society and media. However, questions remain as to why these restrictive amendments were proposed in the first place, why some were adopted, and why members of civil society who demonstrated against the amendments were harassed.

Demonstrators, protesting against the adoption of the amendments yesterday, ahead of the parliamentary session in Baku, were not allowed to march towards parliament. They had their placards forcefully taken away, reportedly by plain-clothes national security officers. A previous demonstration on 10 May 2009 also saw members of the public beaten by police and approximately 50 peaceful demonstrators were detained for a number of hours on that day. ARTICLE 19 believes that these incidents are clear infringements of the rights of citizens to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly.

Civil society and independent media organisations have cautiously celebrated the outcome of yesterday's extraordinary session of the *Milli Mejlis*, which could have led to the imposition of severe restrictions on their establishment and funding. But they remain concerned that some amendments, which have been adopted, retain restrictive provisions such as those concerning financial reporting and registration of foreign non-governmental organisations. It is unclear why these amendments were adopted and there are concerns about their implementation.

Azerbaijan has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which guarantees the fundamental rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of assembly. ARTICLE 19 urges the Azerbaijani government to respect and uphold these rights, cornerstone to human rights protection.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.