

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Widespread Arrests, Torture and Beatings Follow Fraudulent Elections

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(New York, January 23, 2004) Azerbaijan's government has unleashed a massive crackdown on the political opposition in the wake of the fraudulent October presidential election, Human Rights Watch said in [a new report](#) released today.

The 61-page report, [Crushing Dissent: Repression, Violence and Azerbaijan's Elections](#), documents hundreds of arbitrary arrests, widespread beatings and torture, and politically motivated job dismissals of members and supporters of the opposition following the October 15 presidential election, which was widely condemned by the international community as fraudulent.

Azerbaijan is experiencing its gravest human rights crisis of the past ten years, said Rachel Denber, acting executive director of the Europe and Central Asia Division of Human Rights Watch. The government must take immediate steps to end the repression.

On January 27 the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly will debate Azerbaijan's compliance with the organization's human rights requirements. Azerbaijan became a member of the Council of Europe in 2001, immediately after parliamentary elections that were highly criticized by the international community.

Many hoped that Azerbaijan's admission to the Council of Europe would encourage the government finally to hold free and fair elections, Denber said. These hopes were crushed. The Parliamentary Assembly needs to adopt a strong resolution making clear that Azerbaijan's credentials are at risk unless the government remedies the situation.

The Human Rights Watch report documents human rights violations committed by the Azerbaijani authorities before, during and after the presidential election. The report is based on hundreds of interviews with victims and eyewitnesses in 13 towns and cities in Azerbaijan in October and November.

Human Rights Watch found that the government prevented opposition candidates from campaigning effectively. Police brutality and arbitrary arrests intimidated opposition supporters and the general public. On election day, the government carried out a well-organized campaign of fraud throughout the country to ensure victory for the ruling party candidate, Ilham Aliyev, right in front of the largest international election-monitoring team ever deployed in the country.

Violence erupted immediately after the election. The report documents the use of brutal and excessive force by police to suppress demonstrations, severely injuring at least 300 protesters, and killing at least one protester. So far, the Azerbaijani authorities have refused to investigate or punish security forces for using excessive force.

In the weeks following the election, the Azerbaijani authorities used the post-election violence as a pretext for a massive crackdown on the opposition. Police arrested close to 1,000 people, including national leaders of the opposition, local opposition party members, activists from nongovernmental organizations, journalists, and election officials and observers who challenged the fraud. Human Rights Watch documented numerous cases of police torture through severe beatings, electric shocks, and threats of rape against opposition leaders, particularly by the Organized Crime Unit of the Ministry of Interior.

More than 100 detainees remain in custody, and could face imprisonment of up to 12 years. Police continue to summon political opposition supporters to pressure them to denounce their party membership. Human Rights Watch documented more than 100 cases in which opposition members and their relatives were fired from their jobs in retaliation for their political activism, or the activism of their relatives.

Human Rights Watch found that the complete dominance of the presidency was one of the root causes of human rights abuses in Azerbaijan. Many of the abuses documented by Human Rights Watch took place on the direct orders of the local executive authorities,

who are appointed by and accountable to only the presidents office.

In light of the visible and significant support provided by the international community for free and fair elections in Azerbaijan, Human Rights Watch expressed disappointment about the often muted and contradictory messages expressed by foreign governments and election-monitoring missions in the aftermath of the presidential election. For example, the U.S. government initially congratulated Ilham Aliev on his victory, then offered a statement of concern about the abuses, and ultimately resorted to silence about the situation during U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfelds visit to Azerbaijan in December.

The international community needs to take a strong and consistent stance against the rising tide of abuse, said Denber. In light of President Bushs recent statements on democracy in neighboring countries in the Middle East, U.S. inaction on Azerbaijan is particularly troubling.

The Human Rights Watch report contains recommendations to the Azerbaijani government and the international community. These include:

Establish an independent commission of inquiry, with significant international participation, to investigate the election fraud.

Investigate allegations of physical abuse and torture, particularly at the Ministry of Interiors Organized Crime Unit, and discipline or prosecute those agents found responsible. The international community, particularly governments of the European Union and United States, should ensure that police units complicit in torture do not benefit from foreign financial assistance.

Immediately review the cases of all remaining detainees arrested on suspicion of involvement in the violence of October 15 and 16. Investigate allegations of torture and abuse against these detainees. Unconditionally release all detainees against whom no specific evidence of illegal activities exists.

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