



12 February 2015

Mr. Patrick Hickey
President
European Olympic Committees
Palazzina CONI
Via della Pallacanestro, 19
00135 Rome, Italy
Facsimile (+39) 06 36 85 76 66

Dear Mr. Hickey,

We, the undersigned human rights organisations, are writing to express our deepest concern about the organisation of the first European Games in Baku, Azerbaijan in June 2015. The aim of this letter is to draw your attention to the likelihood of significant and ongoing human rights violations in Azerbaijan during preparations for this event, and to inform the Committee of the work of the international NGO coalition ‘Sport for Rights’.

The principles of fair Olympic competition — those of placing sport “at the service of the harmonious development of humankind” and “promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity”— are enshrined in the Olympic Charter. These principles must be upheld in both the athletic competition and the entire organisational process and infrastructure of any multi-sport event. The experience of previous international public events organised by Azerbaijan, such as the Eurovision Song Contest in 2012, strongly indicates that President Aliyev’s regime will seek to use the Olympic event to whitewash or hide its deteriorating human rights record.

Unlawful evictions have taken place across Baku to make way for luxurious infrastructure, thus concealing the country’s true poverty level. Given the rampant corruption throughout the regime and the fraudulent business activities of President Aliyev’s family, there is little doubt that hosting the European Games in Baku will have a seriously negative impact on local communities by depriving them of much needed support for real, sustainable development.

The severe and unprecedented crackdown on civil society activists and journalists in recent months signals not only the further curtailment of the public sphere in Azerbaijan, but also raises suspicions that anyone who attempts to expose human rights violations will share the

fate of imprisoned government critics. Over the course of 2014, the Azerbaijani authorities have convicted or imprisoned at least 34 journalists, bloggers, human rights defenders and civil society activists, including prominent investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova, human rights activist Leyla Yunus, civil rights lawyer Intigam Aliyev, and Rasul Jafarov, coordinator of the "Sing for Democracy" (2012) and "Art for Democracy" (2013) campaigns and activist for political prisoners. All of these people face long-term prison sentences under sham charges such as 'tax evasion', 'high treason', 'illegal entrepreneurship' and 'abuse of power'. These spurious accusations are used to justify the criminalization of fundamental rights such as freedom of association and freedom of speech.

Since the summer of 2014, many human rights groups and NGOs have ceased their activities, while dozens of activists have either fled the country or gone into hiding. Emin Huseynov, prominent human rights defender and the Director of the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS), was forced into hiding in August 2014, facing imminent arrest on false charges. He was prevented from flying to Turkey for urgent medical treatment on August 5, 2014. IRFS, a registered non-profit NGO, has been wrongly accused of tax evasion; however the charges pertain to income tax, VAT and profit tax, none of which apply to the non-profit NGO under national law. Thus IRFS has been closed since early August 2014, while its Director, who has a registered disability, has been forced into hiding without access to necessary medical care.

These arrests and scare tactics are politically motivated, used by the regime to silence activists who speak out for the right to live in a free state based on transparency and accountability. Leading international human rights organisations consider those listed above to be political prisoners. International bodies including the European Court of Human Rights, Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI) and the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights have observed the human rights violations in Azerbaijan. They also acknowledge the need of public and private international actors to place pressure on the Azerbaijani authorities in this regard.

If the 2015 European Games are to be a truly fair, noble and joyous event, conducted in compliance with the principles of the Olympic Charter, the Azerbaijani government must end its persecution of critics and journalists. It must cease its unlawful financial and environmental practices. As a highly prestigious international event, the European Games will receive a high degree of media coverage. It would be a shameful legacy if the first ever event of this kind is overshadowed by grim news of political imprisonments and official corruption.

We are therefore worried to learn from press outlets that you have personally celebrated Azerbaijan's economic growth and its growing presence on the world stage at the World Economic Forum's Annual Assembly in Davos, without publicly reminding the authorities of their obligations in regard to principles and values embodied also by the Olympic spirit¹.

Honouring the initiative of Rasul Jafarov, who cannot lead the campaign personally due to his pre-trial incarceration, a number of human rights NGOs have formed the 'Sport for Rights' coalition to raise awareness about corruption and political prisoners in Azerbaijan. Our aim is to encourage national Olympic committees, athletes, the press and the public to speak up for our imprisoned colleagues and for all Azerbaijanis facing violations of their basic rights and freedoms.

¹ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jan/28/azerbaijan-singled-out-at-davos-for-sports-leaders>

We ask you to support our initiative by calling on the government of Azerbaijan to release all of the detained activists and critics in advance of the opening ceremony of the European Games, and to cease the further prosecution of independent journalists and human rights defenders. We demand guarantees for a free and objective media in Azerbaijan, and the necessary conditions for the operation of independent NGOs. Any positive action undertaken by you, as the organiser of the event, can help alleviate the suffering of many people.

We would appreciate your response to our concerns, which should be directed to Ms. Dominika Bychawska-Siniarska, Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (ul. Zgoda 11, 00-018 Warsaw, Poland, email, d.bychawska@hfhr.org.pl) and Ms. Gulnara Akhundova, International Media Support (Nørregade 18, 1165 Copenhagen K, Denmark, email, ga@mediasupport.org).

Sincerely,

NGO coalition “Sport for Rights”, including:

1. Article 19 (United Kingdom)
2. Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine)
3. Education for Democracy (Poland)
4. European Stability Initiative (Germany)
5. Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Poland)
6. Human Rights House Foundation (Norway)
7. Index on Censorship (United Kingdom)
8. International Media Support (Denemark)
9. International Partnership for Human Rights (Belgium)
10. Netherlands Helsinki Committee (Netherlands)
11. Norwegian Helsinki Committee (Norway)
12. People in Need (Czech Republic)
13. Platform London (United Kingdom)
14. Polish Institute for Human Rights and Business (Poland)
15. Reporters Without Borders (France)
16. Solidarity with Belarus Information Office (Poland)
17. YouAid Foundation (Poland)