

Azerbaijanis Denounce Iran for "Blatant" Prisoner Claim at the UN Human Rights Council

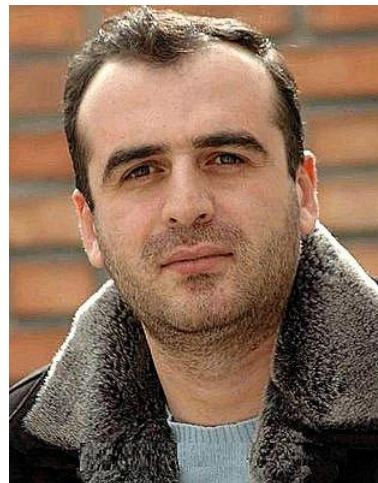
Vancouver, March 1, 2010: Advocates for the Azerbaijani minority in Iran are furious at the government of Iran for using the UN's premier human rights body to deny that Iran holds political prisoners.

The claim was made in Geneva at a February 15 meeting of the governmental UN Human Rights Council, during a review of Iran's human rights record. In a 31-page document, the Iranian government claimed that 70 percent of the prison sentences in Iran last year were related to drug offenses and trafficking. A team of 33 Iranian government officials then defended the report before the Council.

Iran's case was ridiculed yesterday by the Association for the Defense of Azerbaijani Political Prisoners in Iran (ADAPP), an advocacy group that works from Vancouver and partners with the Advocacy Project (AP).

Iranian Azerbaijanis make up more than 25% of the population, but have suffered widespread persecution. Their plight has been eclipsed by the emergence last summer of the Iranian opposition following the disputed elections.

Last summer, AP sent a Peace Fellow, [Farzin Farzad](#), to help ADAPP publicize its work. ADAPP now sends out a bulletin, and the [latest issue](#) charges the Iranian authorities with gross misrepresentation at the UN Council. The ADAPP expresses concern at the plight of several Azerbaijani activists who have been sentenced to jail terms. These include Said Matinpour (right, photo) who was detained for 278 days in solitary confinement, drugged, and allegedly tortured before being sentenced to 8 years at Evin Prison.



Another Azerbaijani activist, Behrouz Alizadeh, received electric shocks and was water-boarded. "Azerbaijani prisoners are denied proper access to legal counsel and visits from their families," said the ADAPP bulletin.

Under the UN review process, known as the Universal Periodic Review, civil society is

invited to submit evidence and the ADAPP's submission was included in a summary by the UN secretariat. It reads: "The Azerbaijani language is banned in schools, Azerbaijani language journals and journals are shut down...Shops with Azerbaijani Turkish names are effectively shut down.... Many advocates of broader linguistic and cultural rights for Azerbaijanis are detained arbitrarily, held indefinitely and tortured, on occasion murdered, in custody."

The ADAPP welcomed the fact that its submission was included and fairly summarized. But the group also expressed concern that the UN review process will put little pressure on Iran and may even backfire by allowing the government a platform.

The US spoke out against Iran during the recent UN debate, but Western governments on the Council are heavily outnumbered and Islamic governments often vote as a bloc. The task of summarizing the review will be left to a "troika" of three Council members - Mexico, Senegal, and Pakistan. Pakistan made its position clear by speaking of the need for "cooperation" instead of criticism when it comes to human rights.

Adding to the ADAPP's concern, Iran is lobbying hard for a seat on the Council. Iran's election, in May, would provide the regime with a strong weapon against its critics and discourage NGOs that have sought to keep abusive governments off the Council.

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