

TAKE ACTION: Please cut and paste this letter onto your personal or Institutional letterhead expressing concern for the fate of Rafiq Tagi and Samir Sadagatoglu.

8 December 2006

President Ilham Aliyev
Office of the President of the Azerbaijan Republic
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Baku AZ1066 Azerbaijan
Fax: +011 994 12 492 0625
E-mail: president@gov.az

Excellency,

I wish to add my name to this appeal from PEN Canada, the Canadian centre of the international writers' organization, International PEN. PEN Canada is writing to express serious concern for the well-being of **Rafiq Tagi** and **Samir Sadagatoglu**, whose execution has reportedly been demanded by religious extremists.

According to our information, on 1 November 2006, a small Azerbaijan newspaper, *Sanat*, published an article titled "Europe and Us", comparing European and Islamic traditions in which it was suggested that Islam had hindered progress in the development of Muslim states such as Azerbaijan. This article led to outrage among Muslim conservative groups and the subsequent arrest of the newspaper's editor Samir Sadagatoglu, and the author of the article, Rafiq Tagi (also referred to as Taghizad). On 15 November, the Nasimi District Court in the Azerbaijan capital, Baku, charged the two men under Article 283 of the Criminal Code with inciting national, racial and religious enmity, and ordered them to be held in pre-trial detention for up to two months. If convicted, they face between three and five years in prison.

This action did little to appease those who objected to the article; and, on 17 November, conservative Muslims based in Nadaran, a town situated north of Baku, held protests during which death threats were made against Sadagatoglu, Tagi and their families. Tagi reportedly denied that the article had slandered or insulted Islam or the Prophet Mohammed.

As the days passed, the protests spread not only to other areas of Azerbaijan, but also into neighbouring Iran, where protestors gathered outside the Azerbaijan embassy in Tehran. By late November, the situation for the journalists deteriorated further when the Grand Ayatollah Fazel Lankarani, based in Iran, issued a fatwa (religious decree) ordering that the two men be executed. Another Iranian cleric based in the Tebriz area of Iran where there is a significant Azeri population, also reportedly offered his house as a reward for the death of the two men. However, not all support the fatwa, and there have been counter protests by Muslim groups in Azerbaijan stating Sadagatoglu and Tagi have the right to express their views and voicing concern about what they consider to be undue influence of the more conservative members of the religious community over the country's affairs.

The Azerbaijan Prosecutor General's office has also made clear its opposition to the death threats in a press statement that said, "We live in a constitutional state and all issues should be solved by law" adding that the death threats are "unacceptable", and that police protection was being provided to the two men's families.

Meanwhile, Sadagatoglu and Tagi remain detained and their families under police protection.

PEN Canada considers the detention of Rafiq Tagi and Samir Sadagatoglu to be in direct violation of their right to freedom of expression and calls for their release. We are appalled by calls that the two men be executed and by the threats made against their families. While we welcome the fact that the Azerbaijan prosecutor general's office has made clear its opposition to the calls for the two men's death and that protection is being provided to the families, PEN Canada remains concerned that

their imprisonment for an article published in a newspaper is in clear breach of international standards protecting the right to freedom of expression, notably Article 19 of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Azerbaijan is a signatory. We therefore calling for their immediate and unconditional release.

Sincerely,

[Your name and address]

Copies to:

Minister of Internal Affairs
Lt.-Gen. Ramil Usubov
Ministry of Internal Affairs
Husu Hajiyevev Street 7, 370005 Baku, Azerbaijan
Fax: +011 994 12 92 45 90

Also care of:

Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Canada
275 Slater Street, Suite 904
Ottawa ON K1P 5H9
Fax: +1 613 230 8089
E-mail: Azerbaijan@azembassy.ca

Permanent Representative of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the United Nations
866 United Nations Plaza, Suite 560
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Fax: +1 212 371 2784/2672
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Please send copies of your appeal to the following Canadian authorities:

The Hon. Peter MacKay
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Lester B. Pearson Building, Room A-10
125 Sussex Drive
Ottawa ON K1A 0G2
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