

Azeris Accused of Targeting Dissenters

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BAKU, Azerbaijan — A leading rights watchdog accused Azerbaijan on Tuesday of concerted efforts to silence dissent, cushioned from criticism by its strategic importance to the West.

"There's been just a steady deterioration in media freedoms, a steady closing of the space," said Rachel Denber, deputy director of the Europe and Central Asia division at New York-based Human Rights Watch.

"Journalists see their colleagues getting thrown in prison and it has a chilling effect," Denber said.

The report, released ahead of Nov. 7 parliamentary elections, cited the prosecution and imprisonment of dozens of journalists and physical attacks by police. It said criminal and defamation laws are often used to silence nonviolent criticism and opposition views.

The report noted the high-profile jailing of outspoken journalist Eynulla Fatullayev, held since 2007 despite a European Court of Human Rights ruling in April this year criticizing his trial and requesting his release.

It also cited the imprisonment in late 2009 on hooliganism charges of two satirical bloggers, Adnan Hajizade and Emin Milli, in a case that has drawn widespread condemnation.

The government denies curbing media freedoms, saying legislation is in line with international standards. In response to the report, the prosecutor's office said reforms had "completely ensured" freedom of expression, media and information.

Opposition politicians and journalists say the United States and European Union have muted their criticism because of Azerbaijan's geostrategic importance, a Muslim ally rich in oil and gas and sandwiched between Iran, Turkey and Russia.

HRW said criticism of Azerbaijan's human rights record had changed little in how the West engages with the regime, possibly "due to the fact that these actors prioritize Azerbaijan's geostrategic importance and hydrocarbon wealth.

"Sustained pressure and clear benchmarks for remedying human rights violations are needed if the international community is to succeed in persuading the Azeri government to respect fundamental rights and liberties," the report said.

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