

Transforming Baku, State Tears Down Rights Office

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BAKU, Azerbaijan — Azeri authorities have demolished the office of a human rights group that has led a campaign against a radical face-lift of the booming capital, Baku, drawing condemnation from the European Union and United States.

The building, which had housed the Institute for Peace and Democracy as well as an anti-landmine group and a women's crisis center, was torn down after dark Thursday without warning, Institute for Peace and Democracy activist Azad Isazade said in an interview.

"They didn't inform us of their intentions and didn't even let us take our property out, and almost everything was destroyed with the office," said Isazade, who was at work at the time.

The building was earmarked for demolition, but New York-based Human Rights Watch said the owner, Institute for Peace and Democracy director Leyla Yunus and her husband, had obtained an injunction in May 2011 from a local court pending a final court decision.

"The government's ruthless demolition of an office that serves as a hub for human rights activism in Azerbaijan sends a chilling message to all [Azeris]," Human Rights Watch said in a statement.

Flush with the proceeds of oil and gas sales from reserves in the Caspian Sea, authorities are transforming Baku from a former Soviet backwater to a gleaming coastal capital for an emerging jet set.

To make room, some old neighborhoods have been swept away in a demolition campaign that has drawn condemnation from rights groups, most notably the Institute for Peace and Democracy.

The European Union's office in Azerbaijan issued a statement saying it "deplores" the demolition, made worse by the fact that it took place despite the court injunction, while the owner was abroad and without the possibility of removing private and professional belongings from the premises.

The U.S. Embassy in Baku also expressed concern about the building's demolition and urged the Azeri authorities to assure that laws on property rights are respected. In a statement, it underscored "the central role of respect for property rights and rule of law as foundations of a free and prosperous society."

Isazade said officials from the Baku mayor's office and the State Property Committee, who were present during the demolition, had said there was a gas leak in the building and cited plans to demolish a number of old buildings in the area.

Neither the mayor's office nor the State Property Committee could be reached for comment.

Yunus had been quoted on Thursday in a New York Times article about the demolition campaign.

"This nighttime demolition, without warning or allowing the tenants to remove personal property, suggests that the authorities were looking to punish Yunus for her work defending people's property," Human Rights Watch said.

It said the demolition campaign has affected hundreds, possibly thousands, of homeowners and residents, and violated property rights.

It has cited cases of apartment buildings torn down while court challenges were still pending, their residents detained at night by police. Human Rights Watch said compensation offered in many cases is far below the market value for property in central Baku.

(Reuters, AP)

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