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Amnesty International Raps Azerbaijan on Freedoms

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TBILISI — Azerbaijan must act urgently to uphold freedom of expression and the international community must not turn a blind eye to human rights violations there, Amnesty International said Wednesday.

"In oil-rich Azerbaijan, 20 years of independence, economic prosperity and relative stability have failed to translate into greater fundamental freedoms for its citizens," the human rights group said in a report.

"Consolidation of authoritarian rule over the last decade has been largely ignored by the outside world," it added.

Critics accuse Azeri President Ilham Aliyev of clamping down on dissent, notably earlier this year when hundreds of people gathered in the streets of the capital for a series of demonstrations inspired by the Arab Spring.

Amnesty said police had used excessive force to break up the peaceful, but not officially

approved, demonstrations. In Baku, police arrested dozens of opposition activists during the protests.

The government says Azerbaijan enjoys full freedom of speech and a thriving opposition press.

Amnesty said threats and intimidation against human rights defenders and journalists had been used to shut down and deny registration to civil society groups.

"The clampdown has sent out a clear and calculated message — that public expression of dissent will not be tolerated, nor will be any attempt to galvanize public opinion against the current regime," said Natalia Nozadze, Amnesty International's Azerbaijan researcher.

Amnesty considers 17 people convicted around the time of the protests to be prisoners of conscience and asks for their immediate release.

It called on the European Union and other international organizations to press Azerbaijan to release the prisoners of conscience and end the suppression of peaceful protest, critical opinion and political opposition.

Europe wants to reduce its dependence on Russian natural gas and sees Azerbaijan as a significant alternative supplier.

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