

Baku Office of RFE/RL Raided as Activists Warn of End to Free Speech

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The Azeri Prosecutor General's Office has begun a raid on the Baku bureau of the U.S. government-funded RFE/RL in connection with the organization's overseas financing, the news agency reported on its website Friday.

Kenan Aliev, the bureau's director, said at least 10 representatives of the prosecutor's office had arrived Friday morning in the company of several armed policemen.

They presented a warrant to search the premises and warned that the offices would be closed. All RFE/RL employees were forced to turn off their mobile phones and the office's Internet connection was disabled, the report said.

RFE/RL — short for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty — is a news organization founded and funded by the U.S. government to provide a substitute free press in countries where the free flow of information is still developing or explicitly banned by the state.

But despite their state funding, the U.S. government "is not involved in RFE/RL's operational or editorial decisions," according to the news agency's website.

The raid on the news agency comes just as a court hearing is being held in a criminal case against Khadija Ismayilova, a journalist with RFE/RL's Baku office, according to the Azeri news site Haqqin.az.

Ismayilova was arrested in early December for allegedly inciting a colleague to commit suicide, although the investigative journalist says the charges against her are "absurd" and an attempt to put pressure on her for having exposed human rights abuses in Azerbaijan.

Ismayilova had written exposés concerning corruption among several high-ranking Azeri politicians, including the family of President Ilham Aliyev.

Her arrest has caused alarm in the international human rights community, with activists warning that the case against her signifies a wider crackdown on free speech in Azerbaijan.

Earlier this month, Meydan TV, one of Azerbaijan's last remaining independent media outlets, closed down its offices in Baku in what its director said was a move aimed at ensuring its employees' safety, according to a statement on its website.

Its closure came after the head of Azerbaijan's Presidential Administration issued a 60-page report accusing journalists in the republic, including Ismayilova, of working against the Azeri government at the behest of the European Union and the U.S.

If convicted, Ismayilova faces up to seven years behind bars.

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