

Azerbaijan Blocks Critical Amnesty International Visit Ahead of European Games

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People walk past a banner promoting the European Games in Baku, Azerbaijan, June 11, 2015.

BAKU — Azerbaijan has blocked a visit by Amnesty International at which it planned to highlight human rights abuses in the south Caucasian republic as it prepares to host the inaugural European Games, Amnesty said.

The human rights campaign group said it had planned to launch a report called "Azerbaijan: the Repression Games" in Baku, but had been told by the Azeri Embassy in London that Azerbaijan was "not in a position to welcome the Amnesty mission to Baku at the present time."

Azeri officials were not immediately available for comment.

The Games, a multi-sport event along the lines of the Olympics, open in the Azeri capital on Friday and run until June 28.

The ex-Soviet republic has been ruled by the late Haidar Aliyev and then his son Ilham since 1993.

Although rights groups accuse the government of muzzling dissent and jailing opponents to prevent the rise of any political opposition, charges it denies, Azerbaijan is courted by the West as an alternative to Russia in supplying oil and gas to Europe.

On Tuesday, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was given one month to halt its operations in Azerbaijan, only months before a parliamentary election.

Several rights activists and journalists have been jailed this year and last on charges including illegal business activity and hooliganism. Their lawyers say the trials were politically motivated.

Amnesty says at least 20 prisoners of conscience are in prison or detention awaiting trial on charges ranging from drug abuse to fraud or embezzlement and treason.

"The actions of the authorities have only highlighted their desperate attempts to create a criticism-free zone around the games," Denis Krivosheev, Amnesty International's deputy director for Europe and Central Asia, said Wednesday in a statement.

"The legacy of these games will be to further encourage repressive authorities around the world to view major international sporting events as a ticket to international prestige and respectability."

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