

Armenian Political Prisoner in Baku Launches Hunger Strike

Global Humanitarian and Business Leader, Ruben Vardanyan, Demands Immediate and Unconditional Release of All Armenian Prisoners

Yerevan, April 19, 2024 – The family of illegally detained philanthropist, Ruben Vardanyan, announced today that he entered into a hunger strike to demand the immediate and unconditional release of himself and the other Armenian prisoners illegally held in Baku.

The hunger strike began on April 5, 2024, following repeated requests by Vardanyan and counsel to provide a fair and transparent trial in a timely manner in line with international legal standards. Tellingly, since his hunger strike began, his family's phone calls with him have been cut off, in clear violation of all international norms. The original trial slated for January was extended without cause to May.

Last September, armed forces of the government of Azerbaijan invaded the region of Nagorno-Karabakh, triggering the exodus of the 120,000 inhabitants of the region. During the plight of the refugees, Vardanyan and 7 other former officials were arrested and now face spurious politically motivated charges. They are all political prisoners.

"I am deeply concerned about the health and well-being of my father," said David Vardanyan, one of Mr. Vardanyan's sons. "For nearly 200 days, my family has not seen my father. We have had absolutely no contact with him since he launched his hunger strike on April 5th."

Vardanyan's hunger strike tragically coincides with the 109th anniversary of the Armenian genocide which will occur on April 24th demonstrating how Armenians continue to be targets of ethnic cleansing and are still targeted for persecution around the world.

Ruben Vardanyan is a loving husband and a father of four. He is also an influential Armenian business leader, social entrepreneur, and philanthropist. Together with his partners from around the world, he has driven more than \$1.5 billion toward advancing economic development, addressing humanitarian challenges, and supporting global education initiatives.

A former State Minister of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic from November 2022-February 2023, Mr. Vardanyan has been charged with false accusations, held in

conditions against international law, and faces a trial that will not be up to international standards, especially regarding access of international observers to the proceedings. In addition, Mr. Vardanyan's case has been separated from the other seven political prisoners, raising questions about whether he in particular is being politically targeted.

"The illegal detention of Ruben and the other former leaders of Artsakh is an egregious abuse of human rights and the international justice system and must be ended," said Paul Polman, Selection Committee member of the Aurora Humanitarian Initiative co-founded by Ruben Vardanyan. "The irony of this entire situation is that Azerbaijan has been selected to host COP 29 in a blatant attempt to "greenwash" their international reputation. COP has a major focus on the interconnectivity of climate change and human rights at a time when they are abusing both in plain sight"

Mr. Vardanyan's family demands that:

1. All illegally detained ethnic Armenian prisoners, including Ruben Vardanyan should be released immediately and unconditionally.
2. Should the illegal trials proceed, they must happen before the prisoners' detention orders expire in May, must meet global legal standards, and international observers and media must be allowed to attend.
3. The Azeri government must allow immediate access of the International Red Cross to assess the wellbeing of Ruben and the other prisoners. The family's access to telephone calls with Mr. Vardanyan must be restored.
4. Any peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan must include the release of all ethnic Armenian prisoners.
5. COP 29 should not proceed in Azerbaijan without these steps occurring.

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