

Armenian Political Prisoner, Ruben Vardanyan, Granted Permission to Speak With Family Who Plea for End to His Hunger Strike

Overwhelming International Support and Pressure Leads Azeris to Allow Communications With Family After Twenty Days in Isolation as Humanitarian and Business Leader Faces Deteriorating Health

APRIL 25, 2024 – Family members confirmed today that thanks to the growing international public and government awareness, illegally detained philanthropist, Ruben Vardanyan, was granted permission to speak to his wife, Veronika, today. This marks only his second call to his family after nearly three weeks of incommunicado detention since Mr. Vardanyan launched his hunger strike on April 5.

The strike began on April 5, 2024, after requests were repeatedly ignored for a fair and transparent trial to be held in a timely manner in line with international legal standards. His trial was originally slated for January, but then extended to May without cause.

The family was finally able to plead with Mr. Vardanyan to end the hunger strike in light of his deteriorating health condition. In their brief conversation they were able to inform him of the growing pressure on Azerbaijan from government officials around the world. After hearing of this global movement to free Armenian prisoners and after listening to his family's pleas, Mr. Vardanyan reluctantly agreed to pause his hunger strike for his family's sake.

In recent weeks several initiatives were undertaken, including the United States Congress putting forth proposed legislation to sanction high level officials from Azerbaijan government for the illegal detainment of political prisoners, as well as the EU Parliament resolution introduced today, April 25. In addition, rallies of support to release the political prisoners took place yesterday in the U.S., France, and Armenia aligned with recognition of the 109th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide.

Mr. Vardanyan remains in captivity in Baku and faces worsening prison conditions. After his hunger strike began, he was denied regular telephone calls with family, adding to the list of Azerbaijan's violations of international norms. Mr. Vardanyan was also shifted to complete isolation with no access to appropriate health care beyond occasional evaluations of his blood pressure. Serious concerns remain about the true state of his health condition.

"We are gravely concerned about my father's deteriorating health, though we are not surprised by his bravery," said David Vardanyan, one of Mr. Vardanyan's sons. "Despite our initial relief, my father's conditions are only worsening. The world has shown Azerbaijan that it is watching the fate of the Armenian prisoners, including my father, and from our family I want to thank everyone for their support at this difficult time. I hope that this growing international attention may lead to his release in the nearest future. We urge the international community to further increase the pressure on Azerbaijan to ensure that at least his trial takes place in May 2024 with international observers."

The State Department's annual Human Rights Report, released on April 23, corroborated the unjust conditions that Mr. Vardanyan and other political prisoners and detainees face in Azerbaijan. The

report on Azerbaijan estimated that the country held approximately 254 political prisoners and detainees as of December 2023. The judiciary was also described as largely corrupt, inefficient, and lacking independence. According to the report, defendants in Azerbaijan were often “denied the right to a presumption of innocence; a fair, timely, and public trial; to communicate with an attorney of their choice; to have adequate time and facilities to prepare a defense; to confront witnesses and present one’s own witnesses and evidence; and not be compelled to testify or confess guilt.”

Mr. Vardanyan is one of eight former officials arrested last September when armed forces of the Azerbaijani government invaded the Nagorno-Karabakh region, triggering the mass exodus of the 120,000 inhabitants. Now more than 200 days later, the eight Armenian leaders face a series of politically motivated charges.

Mr. Vardanyan is a well-known Armenian philanthropist and businessman, a father of four and a loving husband who has been illegally detained for over 200 days.

He is now charged with false accusations and held in poor conditions. His trial is not expected to adhere to international standards, including those that ensure international observers are granted access to the proceedings. Mr. Vardanyan's case is also separated from the other seven political prisoners, prompting questions about whether he is being politically singled out.

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