

PEN INTERNATIONAL RAPID ACTION NETWORK

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AZERBAIJAN: Writer Akram Aylisli under Threat

A highly regarded novelist, Akram Aylisli, has had his life put in danger in recent days as angry protestors have gathered outside his home, burning copies of his book, and an opposition figure issued threats against him. The source of the outcry is Aylisli's novel, *Stone Dreams*, set in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, and which provides a sympathetic view of Armenians in the conflict. PEN International fears for Akram Aylisli's security. It calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to guarantee Aylisli's safety and that of his family, and to investigate and prosecute any person who has threatened him.

Stone Dreams, is a novella set in the Nagorno-Karabakh region that broke away from Azerbaijan in the early 1990s and which remains a source of tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan. War broke out between Azerbaijani troops and Armenian separatists in 1988. When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Karabakh declared itself an independent republic that escalated the region into a full scale war during which there were reported widespread atrocities. Since 1994 a ceasefire has held although there have been sporadic outbreaks of fighting since. People displaced by the war are still unable to return, and the issue remains a source of acute tension between Azerbaijan and Armenia. *Stone Dreams*, first written in 2007 but not published until five years later, tells the story of two Azeri men who tried to protect their Armenian neighbours from ethnic violence, and also refers to the persecution of Armenians in Karabakh. What has apparently raised the ire of the protestors is that the book reportedly only refers to Azeri abuses against Armenians and makes no reference to attacks by Armenians on Azeris. The book has not yet been published in Azerbaijan, but a Russian translation had already been published in late 2012 in the Russian literary journal *Druzhby narodov* (*Friendship of the Peoples*).

The crisis began to build in earlier this month, as Azerbaijani law makers accused Aylisli of insult to Azerbaijani people, and began to question Aylisli's own ethnicity, suggesting that he be forced to leave Azerbaijan to live in Armenia. Some demanded that he be deprived of his special status as a state writer, a demand that was met on 7 February 2012, when President Ilham Aliyev stripped Aylisli of his pension, which had been awarded to him as recognition of his past contribution to literature in Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani media reports that Aylisli was penalised for "distorting facts in Azerbaijani history and insulting the feelings of Azerbaijani people". The decision came a week after protestors had gathered outside Aylisli's home in Baku, shouting "Shame" and burning his portrait and [books](#). According to Radio Free Europe, *Stone Dreams* also makes thinly veiled criticism of the former president, Heydar Aliyev, father of the current leader, Ilham Aliyev. NGOs and support groups for veterans and refugees have reportedly suggested that they could take legal action against Aylisli.

On 11 February, the chairman of the opposition Modern Musavat Party, Hafiz Hajiyev, announced that he would pay a ransom of 10,000 AZN (c. €9,500) to anyone who cut off Akram Aylisli's ear, adding that he is quite aware of the criminal liability. The Minister of Interior subsequently announced that such calls for violence were unacceptable and will be investigated. However, the threat to Aylisli remains acute.

Speaking to [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty](#) in late January, Aylisli argued "*this novel is a kind of message to Armenians living in Karabakh; in other words, to the Armenian citizens of Azerbaijan ... the message is this: don't think that we've forgotten all the things we've done to you. We accept that. You have also done bad things to us. It's the job of Armenian writers to write about those things ... Maybe they've written about it already, maybe they will write about it in the future. I don't know.*"

Because it's not possible for any people to commit such cruelties and not write about it. Don't politicise these things. If Armenians continue to live in the Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, we have to live side by side. The novel is a message to them. Don't be afraid. It's not the end. We can live together".

Despite the protests, commentators point out that the events of recent days have opened debate on Armenia, and as recently as 7 February Azerbaijan television broadcast a feisty [live debate](#) with Aylisli and a member of the ruling party, and others have openly praised the book.

Aylisli, aged 75, is a highly regarded writer, poet and script writer having won numerous awards in the Soviet and Post-Soviet eras, including, in 2002, Azerbaijan's most prestigious literary prize, the Independence Award. Formally a student at the Maxim Gorky Institute for Literature, he started his literary career in the late 1950s, and his most famous works include *When the Mist Rolls over the Mountains* (1963) and *What the Cherry Blossom Said* (1983). He is also known for his literary translations.

PLEASE WRITE IMMEDIATELY IN AZERBAIJANI OR YOUR OWN LANGUAGE:

*** Protesting the threats against Akram Aylisli and urging the Azerbaijani authorities to provide him and his family with protection against attack.*

*** Urging that there be an investigation into any person threatening Aylisli and that those found responsible be brought to prosecution.*

*** End the harassment and penalties imposed against Akram Aylisli linked to his writings.*

PLEASE SEND APPEALS TO:

**** President Ilham Aliyev**

****Office of the President of the Azerbaijan Republic**

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****Baku AZ1066, AZERBAIJAN**

****Fax: [+994 12 492 0625](tel:+994124920625)**

****Email: office@pa.gov.az**

****Salutation: Dear President**