



## United States Mission to the OSCE

### **Statement on Juma Mosque Community in Azerbaijan**

As delivered by Deputy Representative Douglas Davidson  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
May 6, 2004

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States recognizes that the Government of Azerbaijan has resolved most of the court cases of individuals detained in the wake of last October's post-election demonstrations, and that the majority of these defendants have been released.

We commend Azerbaijan for taking significant steps toward resolving this human rights concern. The United States continues to monitor the remaining cases arising from those events, including those of several leading opposition politicians.

We also note that among the detainees who have been released was Imam, the senior religious leader of the Juma Mosque congregation. On numerous occasions we have expressed the interest of the United States in this case.

While we are concerned about the court's ruling of guilt, we consider Imam Ibrahimoglu's release from prison a positive step for both democratic expression and religious liberty in Azerbaijan. We appreciate the Imam's ongoing work in Azerbaijan to promote religious freedom and we hope that he will be free to continue this work.

The United States however remains troubled by the court case that Azerbaijani authorities have brought against the independent Juma Mosque, this is a case we have raised in the Permanent Council on March 11 of this year. The United States has noted that a court of appeals recently upheld a lower court's order evicting the Juma Mosque congregation from its facilities.

The Juma Mosque case raises concerns about the exercise of religious liberty in Azerbaijan. Government authorities should not act in retaliation against religious groups because some group leaders or members may be involved in political activities. Religious congregations also should not be forced to accept undue oversight or regulation from a government-backed third-party religious association.

It appears that one or both of these motives may lie behind the government's attempt to evict the Juma Mosque congregation from the premises it now occupies.

The United States urges Azerbaijan to refrain from expelling the Juma Mosque congregation from these premises, and to enter into good faith negotiations with the Juma Mosque community to confirm the registration status of the community and to regularize a reasonable usage agreement so that the community may conduct its religious activities in its present location.

Thank you.