

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	366
Land:	Aserbajdsjan
Kilde:	Amnesty International
Titel:	The Human Rights Situation in Azerbaijan Ahead of COP29
Udgivet:	11. juni 2024
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	5. september 2024

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

11 June 2024 index number: EUR 55/8314/2024

THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN AZERBAIJAN AHEAD OF COP29

In November 2024, Azerbaijan will host the 29th Conference of Parties (COP29) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Baku. To ensure its effectiveness, COP29 needs to provide a forum for a free exchange of views. This includes not only the views of parties to the Convention but also civic actors that are the driving force for climate justice and human rights, both local and international.

The Azerbaijani COP29 Presidency has officially declared that “it is working to ensure everyone’s voices are heard and perspectives are considered and included so that we deliver inclusive outcomes based on shared solutions.”¹ However, for more than a decade Azerbaijani authorities have been increasingly closing space for civil society, with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) arbitrarily closed down and civil society representatives arrested or forced into exile.² Since the announcement of Azerbaijan as the host state of COP29 last year, the clampdown on critical voices has intensified further, resulting in arrests and arbitrary detention and prosecution of more than a dozen civil society activists and journalists.

This paper presents Amnesty International’s concerns on Azerbaijan’s human rights record and corresponding implications for Azerbaijan as a host country which aims to ensure effective discussions at COP29 and meaningful outcomes. These concerns include violations of the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, reprisals against human rights defenders and journalists, an effective ban on independent human rights monitoring in the country, widespread violations of the right to a fair trial, and abuse of the criminal justice system for political purposes. The document provides recommendations to the Azerbaijani authorities on steps they can take to address the existing concerns and hold COP29 in an environment that respects and upholds the human rights of everyone in the country.

UNFCCC parties should urge the Azerbaijani authorities to address the deteriorating human rights situation in the country ahead of COP29. As a first step, Amnesty International calls on the authorities to immediately end the clampdown on human rights including the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly and the release of human rights defenders, activists, journalists and government critics imprisoned in retaliation for their human rights work and dissenting views.

Key human rights messages:

Azerbaijani authorities and the international community must ensure safe and enabling environment for civil society at COP29 for participants of all nationalities and opinions;

Azerbaijani authorities must immediately release all those arrested solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, and repeal laws that restrict these rights;

all states attending COP29 should demand from the Azerbaijani authorities meaningful improvements in their human rights record ahead of the conference. This includes, as a matter of priority, calling on Azerbaijani authorities to end reprisals and immediately release all those imprisoned for their human rights work or criticism of the authorities.

¹ COP29 Azerbaijan - United Nations Climate Change Conference, <https://www.cop29.az/en>

² See: Amnesty International, Azerbaijan country page, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/eastern-europe-and-central-asia/azerbaijan>

A. CIVIC SPACE: ARBITRARY DETENTION AND POLITICALLY MOTIVATED ARRESTS

The crackdown on civil society ahead of COP29:

The UN climate change conference (COP29) taking place in Baku between 6 and 18 November 2024 will put Azerbaijan in the global spotlight. The conference will take place against the backdrop of growing repression of Azerbaijani civil society, marked by, *inter alia*, an almost complete suppression of the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. Since Azerbaijan was announced as the host of COP29 last December, the authorities have engaged in an intensified crackdown on civil society, similar to previous crackdowns documented by Amnesty International around other major international events hosted by Azerbaijan, including Eurovision 2012³ and the European Games 2015.⁴

Independent civil society organizations have been closed down, while individuals have been detained or imprisoned under politically motivated charges or forced into exile. The few that remain and may seek to use their independent, critical voice in the run-up to or during COP29, face the risk of severe reprisals, especially after the end of the conference. Azerbaijani human rights defenders estimate that approximately 300 people remain in detention or prison following grossly unfair trials, on politically motivated charges.⁵ This includes human rights defenders, journalists, peaceful protesters, lawyers, and political and other activists, who are held in conditions which do not meet international human rights standards, and who are often denied access to their family members, lawyers, and adequate medical care. In addition, relatives and family members of government critics have also been targeted, either by smear campaigns or by the freezing of their assets through financial sanctions.

Amnesty International therefore warns that, unless Azerbaijani authorities drastically change their approach, independent civil society organizations and individual dissenting voices will not be able to engage freely in COP29. It will seriously undermine the process and taint the outcome of the conference.

Arrests of human rights defenders and government critics:

Some key examples of arbitrary arrests of activists and human rights defenders include the recent case of Anar Mammadli, a prominent human rights defender and climate advocate, who was arrested on 29 April 2024 and placed in pre-trial detention, facing charges of conspiracy to unlawfully bring money into the country.⁶ If convicted, he faces up to eight years in prison. The charges against him are fabricated and his prosecution is apparent retaliation for his criticism of the government and his activism. Anar Mammadli is a founder of the Climate of Justice Initiative, a civil society group which uses the forum of COP29 to highlight human right violations and advocate for the protection of civic space and for environmental justice in Azerbaijan.

Anti-corruption activist and academic Gubad Ibadoghlu,⁷ human rights defender Ilhamiz Guliyev, and opposition leader Tofiq Yagublu⁸ also remain in custody on fabricated charges. Their arrests and prosecutions are apparent retaliations for their political and civic activities and illustrate the government's escalating crackdown on peaceful dissent and criticism ahead of COP29.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) decided in January 2024 not to ratify the credentials of the Azerbaijani delegation, noting its “very serious concerns as to...[Azerbaijan’s] respect for human rights”.⁹ The PACE noted that its Monitoring Committee’s rapporteurs had not been allowed to meet with persons detained on allegedly politically motivated charges, and that the Azerbaijani delegation had failed to cooperate with the Rapporteur for the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights on the theme “threats to life and safety of journalists and human rights defenders in Azerbaijan” and refused his visit to the country three times.¹⁰

³ Amnesty International, “Azerbaijan: Authorities determined to silence dissent to ensure successful Eurovision” (Index: EUR 55/008/2012), 1 May 2012, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/008/2012/en>

⁴ Amnesty International, “Azerbaijan: The repression games: The voices you won’t hear at the first European Games” (Index: EUR 55/1732/2015), 10 June 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/1732/2015/en>

⁵ The News Agency Turan, Number of political prisoners in Azerbaijan approaches 300, 18 March 2024, <https://turan.az/en/politics/number-of-political-prisoners-in-azerbaijan-approaches-300>

⁶ Amnesty International, “Azerbaijan: Human rights defender detained: Anar Mammadli” (Index: EUR 55/8053/2024), 16 May 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/8053/2024/en>

⁷ Amnesty International, “Azerbaijan: Further information: Drop charges and release Gubad Ibadoghlu” (Index: EUR 55/8048/2024), 15 May 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/8048/2024/en>

⁸ Amnesty International, “Azerbaijan: Further information: Free prominent opposition leader: Tofiq Yagublu.” (Index Number: EUR 55/8097/2024) May 31, 2024 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/8097/2024/en/>

⁹ PACE, “Resolution 2527 (2024): Challenge, on substantive grounds, of the still unratified credentials of the parliamentary delegation of Azerbaijan”, adopted on 24 January 2024, <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33333/html>, para. 2.

¹⁰ PACE, Resolution 2527 (previously cited), para. 6.

Silencing independent journalists and the media:

Spurious charges have been brought against more than a dozen independent journalists, who remain in prison or in pretrial detention, while independent media outlets such as Abzas Media, Kanal 13, Toplum TV and others have been effectively extinguished after their key members of staff were arrested under politically motivated charges.¹¹

Since November 2023, six employees of investigative news outlet Abzas Media have been arrested and remain in pretrial detention on charges of smuggling grant money¹² into Azerbaijan: director Ulvi Hasanli,¹³ deputy director Mahammad Kekelov, editor-in-chief Sevinj Vagifgyzy, and staff journalists Elnara Gasimova and Nargiz Absalamova. Two independent journalists, Hafiz Babali and Imran Aliyev, accused of cooperating with the media outlet, have also been arrested and are in pretrial detention. Abzas Media publications had previously covered alleged corrupt deals by companies connected with government officials. The outlet has also conducted investigations into environmental issues such as pollution and health threats deriving from Gedabek gold mine in Gabaday district in western Azerbaijan. Nargiz Absalamova had been detained in Gabaday in June 2023 while covering protests of local residents against the gold mine, had her phone taken away and was subjected to brutal attacks. The outlet was reportedly planning a further investigation of the gold mine pollution and other human rights violations prior to the arrests.

In November- December 2023, a court in Baku remanded Aziz Orujov, director of Kanal 13, and its anchor Shamo Eminov, on charges of smuggling grant money (similar to those in the case of Abzas Media). The court also ordered to block online access to Kanal 13, which had given platform to political opposition and dissenting voices and covered various human rights issues.

Simultaneously, the authorities arrested at least three journalists covering corruption and human rights issues on charges of extortion.¹⁴ These include Teymur Karimov, reporter and director of online news outlet Kanal-11; Arshad Ibrahimov, the head of the news website Dunyaninsesi.az operating in Ganja (a town 300 km from Baku), and Ibrahim Humbatov of Azerinfo.az.

On 6 March 2024, police raided one of the last remaining independent news channels, Toplum TV, its partner organization, the Institute of Democratic Initiatives (IDI), and the Platform for the Third Republic, an opposition group.¹⁵ Authorities then detained about a dozen journalists and activists including Toplum TV founder Alasgar Mammadli, journalist Mushfig Jabbar, Third Republic board members Akif Gubanov and Ruslan Izzatli and IDI activists Ramil Babayev and Ali Zeynalov.

Torture and ill- treatment and denial of adequate medical care:

Torture and other ill-treatment in detention are widespread in Azerbaijan and are committed with impunity by police and members of other investigating agencies, and those responsible are almost never brought to the justice. There is no independent complaints mechanism, and no access to justice and effective remedies for the victims.¹⁶ Almost all government critics routinely report being subjected to torture and other ill-treatment in detention. As a rule, these allegations are not effectively investigated.

On 3 July, 2024, The Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT), exceptionally, publicly denounced Azerbaijan's "refusal to improve the situation in the light of the Committee's recommendations" and "persistent lack of cooperation of the Azerbaijani authorities with the CPT".¹⁷ In the report published alongside the statement, the Committee expressed extreme concern regarding longstanding and widespread resort to physical ill-treatment (including, on occasion, torture) by the police and called the Azerbaijani authorities "to break this "unholy alliance" between the continued resort to physical ill-

¹¹ Amnesty International, "Azerbaijan: Authorities intensifying crackdown on independent media", 12 December 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/12/azerbaijan-authorities-intensifying-crackdown-on-independent-media>

¹² Criminal Code of the Azerbaijan Republic, Article 206.3.2.

¹³ Amnesty International, "Azerbaijan: Significant concerns about detained journalist Ulvi Hasanli, 20 November 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/azerbaijan-significant-concerns-about-detained-journalist-ulvi-hasanli>

¹⁴ Criminal Code, Article 182.

¹⁵ Amnesty International, "Azerbaijan: Campaign of intimidation against independent media continues with raid on Toplum TV", 7 March 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/03/azerbaijan-campaign-of-intimidation-against-independent-media-continues-with-raid-on-toplum-tv>

¹⁶ Amnesty International, "Azerbaijan: as Azerbaijani forces assume full control over Nagorno-Karabakh, it must respect and protect the rights of local ethnic Armenians." <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/EUR5572542023ENGLISH.pdf>

¹⁷ Council of Europe. European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT). News 2024. *Council of Europe anti-torture Committee issues public statement on Azerbaijan*. 3 July 2024. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cpt/-/council-of-europe-anti-torture-committee-issues-public-statement-on-azerbaijan>

treatment/torture by the police and the pervasive practice of threats, planting evidence, forced confessions and extortion.”¹⁸

Government critics are often denied adequate medical care in detention, resulting in the worsening of their health or pre-existing medical conditions.

Human rights defender Anar Mammadli’s family report at the time of writing that his health conditions have worsened significantly as he is unable to receive adequate medical treatment in detention. Anar Mammadli reportedly suffers from obstructive bronchitis, causing breathlessness and difficulty in breathing, a condition that is further aggravated by poor prison conditions.

Academic Gubad Ibadoghlu, who had been held in pretrial detention for 274 days despite his deteriorating health, including diabetes and a heart condition, was moved to house arrest on 22 April 2024 after his family members warned that his health was reaching “a critical point”.¹⁹ However, he continues to be deprived of liberty, and is not allowed to leave Azerbaijan to receive the medical care he requires.

Alasgar Mammadli of Toplum TV was arrested on 8 March 2024 outside a clinic where he was scheduled to get tested for suspected thyroid cancer. Since then, according to his lawyer and relatives, he has not been provided with adequate diagnostics or treatment. Mammadli’s condition continues to deteriorate as he is experiencing pain and swelling of his thyroid gland, and difficulty breathing during sleep. Ruslan Izzetli a civic activist associated with Toplum TV case is also reported being denied adequate medical treatment for his health conditions which include diabetes and gallstones.

The health of journalist Aziz Orujov is also reportedly worsening in prison. His family members report that Aziz suffers from heart conditions, high blood pressure and neurological issues. In March 2024, he was transferred to the prison hospital, however he is not receiving the adequate medical care that he needs. On 14 May 2024 he reportedly suffered from a temporary loss of consciousness.

Reprisals against relatives of critics of the authorities:

Following the arrest of some government critics, the authorities targeted their families and relatives. In the case of Abzas Media, authorities misused the criminal justice system to freeze bank accounts of some of the detained employees and journalists, preventing them from accessing their salaries, pensions, and other financial assets. Ofelya Maharramova, the mother of imprisoned journalist Sevinj Vagifgizi, said she was unable to afford essential medication due to the freezing of her pension and health/disability benefits. The families of Ulvi Hasanli, Abzas Media director, and Aziz Orujov, head of Kanal 13, face severe financial hardship as their bank accounts have been blocked, in apparent retaliation for their relatives’ journalistic activities. The tactic of freezing assets, when it does not serve any lawful objective, represents a form of reprisal, aiming to harass and silence not only critics of the government, but also their families and associates, and to intimidate others, who are considering criticizing the authorities.

Restrictive NGO and media laws:

Azerbaijan has adopted restrictive laws excessively regulating the work of media and non-governmental organizations. A new restrictive media law adopted in 2022 requires media outlets to register with the authorities. To qualify for the registration, the outlets have to comply with excessively onerous and restrictive conditions.²⁰ As a result, media outlets are forced to either cease operations or become vulnerable to prosecution for continuing their journalistic work and receiving grants or other types of financial contributions. In June 2022, the Venice Commission (a Council of Europe body of legal experts that provides legal advice on human rights and democracy) stated that “the Law [on Media] attempts to regulate almost everything related to the media sector in Azerbaijan, including on-line media” and has “a problematic focus on restricting the activities of the media rather than creating the necessary conditions enabling the media to fulfil their ‘public watchdog’ role.”²¹

¹⁸ Council of Europe. Committee for the Prevention of Torture. Report to the Azerbaijani Government on the visit to Azerbaijan carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 12 to 19 December 2022. CPT/Inf (2024) 23. 3 July, 2024. <https://rm.coe.int/1680b08fa3>

¹⁹ Amnesty International, “Azerbaijan: Further information: Jailed academics health in peril: Gubad Ibadoghlu” (Index: EUR 55/7943/2024), 15 April 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/7943/2024/en>

²⁰ Council of Europe: Azerbaijan media law: overregulation in an already restrictive environment, 20 June 2022, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/azerbaijan-media-law-overregulation-in-an-already-restrictive-environment>

²¹ European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), *Joint Opinion of the Venice Commission and the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law of the Council of Europe on the Law on Media*, 17-18 June 2022, [https://venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2022\)009-e](https://venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2022)009-e), para. 51.

Similar tactics are employed against NGOs. Restrictive NGO laws were introduced in Azerbaijan in 2013 and in 2014 which have been applied since, particularly through arbitrary denial of registration and the application of onerous reporting requirements. In the absence of registration, remaining Azerbaijani NGOs have been forced to find ways around the existing restrictions to secure and disburse funding and continue their legitimate work. By aggressively applying these requirements, in some cases retroactively, as well as by manipulating the reporting procedures, the Azerbaijani authorities have created a pretext for a string of arbitrary arrests and prosecutions of their critics for supposed financial irregularities which, the authorities purported, amounted to embezzlement, tax avoidance or illegal entrepreneurship. On the other hand, government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) receive financial support from the state and often try to crowd out or replace genuine civil society organizations or grassroots initiatives for pseudo-participation in decision-making. This practice not only violates the right to freedom of association, but also undermines public trust in those NGOs that continue to operate in Azerbaijan and whose voices are muted or overwhelmed by non-genuine groups.

Suppression of the right to peaceful assembly:

Peaceful protests have been effectively banned in Azerbaijan for over a decade. Opposition groups, activists and those critical of the government, including environmental groups and initiatives, have been deprived of a genuine possibility to assemble peacefully and voice their concerns. In June 2023, in the village of Söyüdlü, Gadabay district, police violently broke up a peaceful environmental protest by local activists demonstrating against the planned expansion of a gold mine, detaining the peaceful protestors as well as journalists covering the protests. At the time of writing, access to Söyüdlü is blocked and police have sealed off the village allowing only residents and pro-government media outlets to enter.

Azerbaijani authorities also restrict the right of assembly for women's rights groups. Baku city authorities routinely deny women's rights groups permission to gather peacefully and mark International Women's Day (IWD), while the police violently disperse and arbitrarily detain the marchers. In 2021, Amnesty International documented gender-based reprisals, including threats and smear campaigns against the IWD organizers.²² To date these acts remain without effective investigation while harassment of IWD organizers and feminist activists continue with impunity.

No civic space for effective climate action or debate:

Due to the restrictive environment for civil society and repression against dissenting voices, there is no space for public participation or effective engagement of civil society in environmental debate or decision-making. Indeed, restrictions on human rights including the rights to freedom of association, expression and peaceful assembly in Azerbaijan limit the opportunities for meaningful participation of NGOs, environmental activists, and civil society. Yet these actors are indispensable for any effective climate action.

B. SUGGESTED RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE AZERBAIJANI AUTHORITIES

Amnesty International calls on the Azerbaijani authorities to:

- immediately and unconditionally release all persons arbitrarily detained for the peaceful exercise of their human rights including human rights defenders, environmental, political and other activists and journalists prosecuted under fabricated and or politically-motivated charges in retaliation for their criticism of the authorities, and overturn their conviction or drop all unfounded criminal charges against and all prisoners and detainees who have been detained and prosecuted under unfounded, politically-motivated charges, including Anar Mammadli, Gubad Ibadoglu, Tofiq Yagublu, Ulvi Hasanli, İlhamiz Guliyev; Mahammad Kekelov, Sevinj Vagifgyzy, Elnara Gasimova; Nargiz Absalamova Hafiz Babali, Imran Aliyev, Shamo Eminov, Teymur Karimov, Arshad Ibrahimov, Ibrahim Humbatov, Alasgar Mammadli, Mushfig Jabbar, Akif Gubanov, Ruslan İzzatli, Ramil Babayev Ali Zeynalov. Afiaddin Mammadov, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, and others;
- for those pending their release, and for all persons in detention or prison, ensure that they are provided with appropriate health care, food and water, and are protected from torture and other ill-treatment. Allow independent medical examination and access to the medical records of the detainees and prisoners on request, by specialists whom they trust;
- end reprisals against and stop the clampdown on civil society and independent media through arbitrary denial of registration, arbitrary arrests of media workers and civil society representatives and other unlawful

²² See, for example: Amnesty International, "Azerbaijan: Gender-based reprisals against women must stop" (Index: EUR 55/4103/2021), 12 May 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/4103/2021/en>

restrictions;

- end reprisals against family members of detained journalists and government critics, including arbitrary freezing of their financial assets;
- publicly commit to upholding and ensuring respect for human rights including the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly and take immediate steps to enact this commitment in the run up to, during and following COP29;
- ensure safe, effective and meaningful participation of Azerbaijani and non-Azerbaijani civil society actors in COP29 without fear of reprisals. Ensure that COP29 provides a safe and enabling environment for civil society, including any NGOs, human rights defenders, journalists and activists who are critical of the Azerbaijani authorities;
- repeal the restrictive Media and NGO laws, including excessive registration and reporting requirements resulting in effective censorship, and ensure that independent media are able to freely cover and report from COP29;
- effectively implement the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights and other Council of Europe key commitments including by enabling visits by Council of Europe bodies.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- Raise human rights concerns with the government of Azerbaijan, at every opportunity, including in the run-up to COP29 and during country leaders' visits/attendance at COP29, in particular demand:
 - immediate and unconditional release of, and acquittal of or termination of criminal proceedings against Anar Mammadli, Gubad Ibadoglu, Tofiq Yagublu, Ulvi Hasanli, İlhamiz Guliyev, Mahammad Kekelov, Sevinj Vagifgyzy, Elnara Gasimova, Nargiz Absalamova Hafiz Babali, Imran Aliyev; Shamo Eminov, Teymur Karimov, Arshad Ibrahimov, Ibrahim Humbatov, Alasgar Mammadli, Mushfig Jabbar, Akif Gubanov; Ruslan Izzatli, Ramil Babayev Ali Zeynalov. Afiaddin Mammadov, Bakhtiyar Hajiyeu, Avaz Zeynali, and all prisoners and detainees who have been detained and prosecuted under unfounded, politically-motivated charges
 - the immediate repeal of restrictive legislation governing freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and the immediate end of all practices that deny or undermine the enjoyment of the respective human rights.
- Express support for civil society and public participation in all statements during and around the COP29 Climate Conference. This includes statements underscoring the role of civil society and recognising the importance of public participation and access to information in effective climate action.
- Take diplomatic, political and other steps to support independent civil society and the right to freedom of peaceful assembly around the COP29 Climate Conference, including by:
 - organising side events at COP29 which involve independent human rights organisations²³.
 - organising meetings with independent civil society during country leaders' visits/attendance at COP 29.
 - requesting prison visits to imprisoned independent civil society and HRDs during country leaders' visits/attendance at COP 29.
 - ensuring that the Host Country Agreement (HCA) with the Azerbaijan authorities contains human rights safeguards and that it is made publicly accessible immediately after it is signed

²³ See for example the German Pavilion at COP27 as a good practice: [Climate justice and human rights at COP27 and beyond - YouTube](#).

FURTHER INFORMATION AND PUBLICATIONS ON AZERBAIJAN:

Azerbaijan: Further information: Free prominent opposition leader: Tofig Yagublu, 31 May 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/8097/2024/en/>

Recommendations to parties to the UNFCCC on human rights consistent climate action in 2024, 20 May 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior40/8022/2024/en/>

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Global: COP28 agreement to move away from fossil fuels sets precedent but falls short of safeguarding human rights, 13 December 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/12/global-cop28-agreement-to-move-away-from-fossil-fuels-sets-precedent-but-falls-short-of-safeguarding-human-rights/>