*Late 1980s a war broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Armenian enclave Nagorno Karabakh. The conflict, which left 25.000 people dead and caused more than a million people to flee their homes, remains unresolved until today. Human Rights defender Arzu Abdullaeva, Chair of the Azerbaijan National Committee of the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly,**has spent 25 years of her life to reconciliation efforts between the two countries. In November, the Netherlands Helsinki Committee awarded Abdullaeva with the Helsinki Civil Society Award for her pioneering work in the world of international diplomacy and peace building. Journalist Eva Cukier spoke with her about her work and the current situation in Azerbaijan.*

**Arzu, how did you become involved in human rights work?**

I have been working in this area for ages. I owe my career to Mient Jan Faber, who is my close friend and my teacher. You know, in the early 1990s people in Azerbaijan had hardly ever heard of concepts such as human rights, civil society or conflict resolution and non-governmental organizations didn’t exist. It was a time of war and conflict in the Caucasus, of refugees, hostages and prisoners-of-war. It was against this background that we started the Helsinki Civil Assembly, the first non-governmental organization of Azerbaijan.

**But why did you decide to dedicate your life to these events?**

I studied history at that time and I was active in one of the popular movements that emerged in the 1980s. I specialized myself in the history of the Karabakh Armenians and I couldn’t understand how people could argue over lands that had been inhabited by the same people for ages. I had a critical mind and as a historic I knew that you should never trust what is being said, that you have to be critical to find the truth. Of course this work is dangerous, but for human rights defenders or peace builders, danger is not an issue. I can’t say that I am a courageous person. I can tell you that am afraid every time I go to Karabakh, but once you’ve chosen this path you can’t stop mid-way.

**What is the focus of your organization today?**

Conflict solving in Karabakh is still one of our focus points. Unfortunately it has become practically impossible to visit Karabakh these days, because of restrictions from the Azeri authorities. Especially the arrest of Arif Yunus (*a human rights defender who was arrested in 2014 because of his peace building efforts. He was released last month -EC*) made thing difficult. But I’m going there anyway. I would very much like to see that the Azeri people stop associating the word ‘Armenian’ with the word ‘enemy’. It’s a difficult job because we do not have enough power to make our statement. The authorities have complete control over the media which allows them to discredit the work of human rights defenders.

**So what can be done?**

You know, the Karabakh conflict is an extremely complex problem because it’s about creating tolerance and reconciliation in a long-standing conflict. Armenia and Azerbaijan are like unequal twins, one is rich and the other is poor but they way they handle political affairs is very similar. Azerbaijan is rich with gas and oil but unfortunately this wealth doesn’t reflect in the social sphere and the people live very poorly. One of the crucial ways to solve the conflict is to raise the level of democracy and strengthen human rights, but that is precisely the problem. The Karabakh conflict was artificially created because it was in the interest of the Soviet political leaders and secret services. Western leaders didn’t know the region well, they had only one goal which was to demolish the USSR which they saw as an evil empire. No attention was paid to reforms.

**Do Azeri people long to return to the Soviet Union?**

Different groups have different opinions, but in average Azeri citizens are oriented towards the West. Of course there are some positive elements from the Soviet times which they would like to revive and integrate in modern society. These are mainly socioeconomic elements, such as the low rents, cheap transport and employment. But they realise that the Soviet government is responsible for the Karabakh and other regional conflicts such as the ones in Abkhazia and Transnistria. Even today, Russia is trying to keep Armenia and Azerbaijan close and any kind of interference from the West immediately evokes Russian aggression. Everybody can see that happening, so there is no wish to focus on Russia or to revive the Soviet Union. Modern Azerbaijan is a non-functional system, based on corruption and nepotism. People get their jobs depending on their loyalty and on how much they pay. This is a big burden to the development of Azerbaijan. The past 2,5 years we have seen serious repression of civil society. But we keep on fighting.

**How exactly can you fight a repressive government?**

I’m a conflict specialist which helps a lot and I use dialogue and negotiation. I would never cooperate with people that lie and persecute, but we have to negotiate. It is like having to negotiate with terrorists to free hostages. But even in the government ranks no one is alike. Some people are more open minded than others, some still have some consciousness left even if they live in a world of lies. These are the people that we focus on, whom we try to persuade and negotiate with.

**So patience is very important in you work.**

Yes, we use all the opportunities we have. The government tries to construct a distorted image of human rights defenders. For instance they will say that civil activists use the money they receive from foreign donors to build private villas. Unfortunately there are rare instances of corruption by civil activists, but you can’t compare it to the levels of corruption within the government. Our reaction is to show them, in a very polite way, that they are wrong. I see it as my task to explain the government and the people of Azerbaijan that civil activists are no thieves, but honourable people that work in the interest of society.

**How strong is the Aliyev government?**

Actually, something strange is happening in the sphere of human rights and politics in Azerbaijan. This year we saw many arrests in the wake of big international events, such as the European Games and the Eurovision Song festival. On the day of the arrival of the German ombudsman his personal interpreter was arrested. These arrests don’t make sense because they occur at a time when there is a lot of international attention to our country. So we suspect a sabotage group active within the governmental ranks. In a reaction, president Aliyev launched an anticorruption programmes which revealed members of this group. Among them is the Minister of National Security, Eldar Makhmudov, under whose control a lot of illegal arrests were taking place. Now this group is being dismantled, it might change the attitude towards human rights activists.

**Have you ever been arrested yourself?**

I have never been in prison, but the authorities and media have done everything in their power to discredit me. You know, I am not a radical person by nature and I like to use logic in my work. I am openly critical and I do show my frustration and anger, but I force people to think for themselves. Aliyev’s Sultanate is doomed to fail, sooner or later our leaders will have to adhere to European standards.

**Doesn’t it bother you to see the warm economic relations of your country with Western countries, including the Netherlands. The so-called caviar diplomacy?**

Yes, it does bother me and we do address it in international meetings. Barosso visited Azerbaijan in a time when human rights suffered extremely. But he focused on strategic partnership and said that he was pleased to see such a high turnover between Azerbaijan and the European Union and called for more economic agreements with Azerbaijan. He mentioned human rights only at the end. Perhaps he did ask for the freedom of political prisoners during his private meetings, but he did not say it publicly. Even so, I wouldn’t be in favour of an economic embargo. These kind of radical measures don’t affect the leaders, they only harm the people.

**Doesn’t that depress you?**

Barosso’s visit didn’t do anything for the human rights situation, but there are other factors that might help. Azeri officials are arrogant, they think that the international community has no right to make democratic demands to Azerbaijan because of its oil revenues. Azerbaijan is indeed very rich, but there is no economic diversification. Due to the low oil prize, Azerbaijan has already lost 5 billion dollars and the devaluation of the manat will cause the loss of another 5 billion. From the 122 billion dollars oil income, only 38 billion is left. Still, our government doesn’t seem to worry, they are busy to save their own skin. But it will have an effect, just like the anticorruption crackdown. The director of the National Bank was arrested who was in business with the Minister of National Security. Last week Russia confiscated a ship owned by the Minister of Transport which was loaded with black caviar and cash money worth more than 1 billion dollars.

**Is it possible that the system will collapse by itself?**

We will need to help it, to speak out and show the ordinary people what is happening. However, we do see some improvements as a result of those political events. We are very happy with the release of Arif Yunus and we expect the release of human rights defenders Leyla Yunus, Intigam Aliyev and Hilal Mamedov.