

TEAS

M A G A Z I N E



Culture | Public Affairs | Business



REMEMBERING BLACK JANUARY – 26 YEARS ON

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www.teas.eu

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Welcome to the TEAS Magazine

The European Azerbaijan Society (TEAS) is a UK-registered pan-European foundation dedicated to raising awareness of Azerbaijan and fostering closer economic, political and cultural links between that country and the nations of Europe.

As well as promoting the positive aspects of Azerbaijan, TEAS also highlights the plight of the 875,000 refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within the country. These people are unable to return to their homes and lands because of the illegal occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding districts by Armenia's armed forces – in defiance of four UN Security Council resolutions.

TEAS has three main facets to its operations:

- Culture – TEAS raises awareness of Azerbaijan's rich and vibrant culture to a worldwide audience by organising cultural events and operating as a networking centre.
- Business – TEAS supports its membership of European and Azerbaijani businesses. It provides a platform for organisations to establish links and strengthen their existing business relationships via a programme of networking opportunities across the regions.
- Public Affairs – TEAS works to increase awareness about Azerbaijan amongst key opinion-formers, key decision-makers and other political, academic and civil society stakeholders.

In pursuit of its objectives TEAS:

- Organises meetings with interested parties, opinion-formers and decision-makers
- Arranges roundtables, seminars, lectures and conferences
- Publishes pamphlets, reports, bulletins, books and produces films
- Facilitates fact-finding trips by politicians and business people.

Facebook

The TEAS Facebook page is your chance to learn about the latest news, events, campaigns and other Azerbaijan-related items. Visit and 'like' our page at: <http://bit.ly/TEASFB>.

Membership and Sponsorship

TEAS offers a range of corporate and individual membership packages, providing such benefits as advertising, trade missions, networking, business sector advice and hotel discounts.

TEAS also offers numerous sponsorship opportunities throughout the year for its events and conferences. To find out more, e-mail: membership@teas.eu.

Enter the TEAS survey and win £100 of Amazon vouchers!

We are currently launching a new initiative to ensure we meet the needs of our friends and supporters and hold up-to-date contact information.

Many of you will have received a SurveyMonkey questionnaire during the past few weeks, and we urge you to complete this. Alternatively, you can complete the form at <http://bit.ly/teassurvey2016> – it is particularly important that you provide your email address so we can exclude you from unnecessary reminders. Please note that all data provided will be held confidentially and will never be passed to third parties.

A draw of respondents will be held on 7 March, and one will receive the prize of £100 of Amazon vouchers! Good luck!

Upcoming Events For full details of all TEAS events, go to [www.teas.eu/upcoming events](http://www.teas.eu/upcoming%20events)

23 February

Endless Corridor Screening (London)

Boothroyd Room, First Floor, Portcullis House (Houses of Parliament), Bridge Street, London, SW1A 2LW. 19.00hrs. RSVP via EventBrite at <http://bit.ly/endlesscorridorlondon> by 21 February. Airport-style security operates at all times, so please aim to arrive by 18.15hrs to clear this, and bring the EventBrite invitation with you. Organised under the auspices of the *Justice for Khojaly* campaign, this event comprises a screening of the independent documentary *Endless Corridor* (Aleksandras Brokas; US/Lithuania; 2015), narrated by Oscar-winning actor Jeremy Irons. The screening has been organised by Bob Blackman MP, Chair, Azerbaijan All-Party Parliamentary Group and will be in the presence of Aleksandras Brokas, the director.

24 February

Khojaly Peace Prize Exhibition (London)

Strangers' Dining Room, Houses of Parliament, London, SW1A 0AA. 16.00hrs. RSVP to James Noble at khojalypeaceprize@connectpa.co.uk; tel: +44 (0)20 7592 9490.

Organised under the auspices of the *Justice for Khojaly* campaign, this parliamentary reception showcases entries to the inaugural Khojaly Peace Prize 2016, comprising entries from students and young artists.

24 February

Khojaly Memorial Evening (Brussels)

Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, rue Ravenstein 23, 1000 Brussels. 18.30hrs. RSVP via EventBrite at <http://bit.ly/khojalybruxelles2016> Organised under the auspices of the *Justice for Khojaly* campaign, this event comprises a screening of the independent documentary *Endless Corridor* (Aleksandras Brokas; US/Lithuania; 2015) and a concert by Azerbaijani violinist Nazrin Rashidova, duetting with pianist Daniel Grimwood.

26 February

Khojaly Commemoration Concert (London)

St. Paul's Church (the Actors' Church), Bedford Street, London, WC2E 9ED. 19.00hrs. RSVP via EventBrite at <http://bit.ly/khojalylondon2016>

Organised under the auspices of the *Justice for Khojaly* campaign, this concert features Rafiq Rustamov (Azerbaijani tar); the Deco Ensemble, led by Sabina Rakcheyeva (violin); Nazrin Rashidova (violin); Jamal Aliyev (cello); Ayyan Salahova and Gunel Mirzayeva (pianos); and Seljan Nasibli (soprano).



Lionel Zetter,
Director,
TEAS

From the TEAS Director

January was another busy month for TEAS and for Azerbaijan. President Ilham Aliyev attended the *World Economic Forum* in Davos, where he delivered an upbeat speech. News that BP had begun explorations for Shah Deniz III supported his optimistic tone.

The President went on to attend the *Supporting Syria and the Region* conference in London, where he empathised with the plight of Syrian refugees. This is particularly the case as Azerbaijan continues to house around 875,000 refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) – the ongoing victims of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. He explained that Azerbaijan is now a donor country and provides aid to a number of countries – including Syria.

I was delighted to attend the Mosaic charity ‘report back’ event at Clarence House in London, and was able to brief HRH Prince Charles, The Prince of Wales, on the progress made in Azerbaijan during the past year. The star of the show, however, was one of the Azerbaijani delegates, Javid Shahmaliyev, who briefed the Prince and all the other VIPs in attendance on his challenging mission to curtail the practice of gender-selective abortions. This enlightened young man has been working with some of the more conservative mosques located near the Iranian border, speaking to congregations from a faith perspective.

It was an honour to be asked to say a few words at the Black January commemoration at the Azerbaijani Embassy on 20 January. Hearing the eyewitness accounts of how unarmed civilian Bakuivians took on Soviet tanks to gain their liberty and precipitate the fall of the Soviet Union is always moving.

In a landmark ruling, PACE has adopted a report that criticises the occupying Armenian forces for preventing water from the Sarsang Reservoir from performing the function for which it was built. In London, James Warlick, US OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair, has been discussing the Nagorno-Karabakh situation with David Lidington, UK Minister for Europe.

We were sad to learn of the forthcoming departure of H.E. Irfan Siddiq, the highly-respected UK Ambassador to Azerbaijan. We look forward to welcoming Dr Carole Crofts as his successor, after she presents her credentials in May.

Lionel Zetter, Director, TEAS



Members of the Azerbaijani and Turkish diaspora come together to reflect and remember (Photos: AzerTag)

Black January martyrs remembered

The date of 20 January is written in blood for Azerbaijanis, marking one of the darkest days in modern Azerbaijani history. On that date in 1990, Soviet troops, under the command of Mikhail Gorbachev, Soviet President, and Dmitry Yazov, Soviet Defence Minister, violently suppressed an uprising by the Baku population. According to official estimates, between 131 and 170 civilians were killed, around 800 were injured, and five went missing, presumed killed. Known as Black January, the date is commemorated as a day of national mourning in Azerbaijan, with the population of Baku placing carnations on the graves of the slaughtered in Martyrs' Lane.

Meeting at the Azerbaijani Embassy in London, Mikayil Jabbarov, Azerbaijani Education Minister; members of the Azerbaijani and Turkish diasporas; and friends of Azerbaijan viewed photographs and films of the massacre and its aftermath, and observed a minute of silence in remembrance of the victims. H.E. Tahir Taghizadeh, Azerbaijani Ambassador to the UK, stated: “For the past 26 years, 19–20 January have gained a very special importance for the people of Azerbaijan. It is both a moment of sorrow, yet a moment of jubilation. It is a moment of sorrow, as over 130 human lives were lost, with hundreds being wounded and detained, and some are still being regarded as ‘missing’. However, it was a moment of jubilation, because this was yet another step on a very difficult

pathway leading to independence. The martyrs will be eternally young and live on two planes – an emotional plane, in our hearts, and as a solid foundation that is at the core of Azerbaijan.”

Dr Ali Tekin Atalar, Chair, Azerbaijan House, commented: “Although this is a sombre day, it should also be remembered as an honourable day, as it marked the beginning of the journey towards an independent and free Azerbaijan. Mikhail Gorbachev, the final Soviet President, personally directed the assault, its aim being to discourage any dissent amongst the restless Soviet republics by making an example of Azerbaijan. This inhumane cruelty, inflicted on the defenceless civilian population, did not manage to crush their will to fight for freedom and liberty.”

Farida Panahova, Board Member, Azerbaijan House, was an eyewitness in Baku to the events of Black January. She said: “The Soviet Army was trying to rescue the totalitarian regime, the rule of the Communist Party and the Soviet Empire. This was the fight between communism and anti-communism, and between democracy and totalitarianism.”

Lionel Zetter, Director, TEAS, commented: “The words used during Remembrance Sunday in the UK are most apposite for Black January: ‘We remember those who gave their todays so we can have our tomorrows’.”



Lionel Zetter, Director, TEAS remembers the martyrs' sacrifices

Gender-selective abortions addressed with the assistance of Prince Charles' Mosaic charity and TEAS

HRH Prince Charles, The Prince of Wales, has been briefed about the success of an inspired young Azerbaijani man's attempts to curb gender-selective abortions in his country during an event at Clarence House on 2 February. TEAS has sponsored the young man's work.

The Mosaic International Leaders' Forum was established by the Prince of Wales to develop the talents and potential of young people in 18 Muslim-majority countries, focusing on their leadership ability, aspirations to become a catalyst for change, and active participation in their communities. This year-long programme began with an intense fortnight of inspirational lectures, field days and mentoring sessions during the International Summit in Amman, Jordan.

TEAS is amongst the global partners for Mosaic, and has sponsored the work of trained social worker Javid Shahmaliyev. He decided to focus on one of the most controversial issues in the Islamic world – gender-selective abortions – from a religious perspective, working with Imams and religious leaders in the regions of Azerbaijan. Substantiating his views with religious doctrine, he has travelled the length and breadth of his country to impress on congregations the importance of women in an inclusive and developing society.

According to Javid, his work fascinated The Prince of Wales: "Yesterday was a



Javid Shahmaliyev – standing alongside H.E. Tahir Taghizadeh, Azerbaijani Ambassador to the UK – outlines his methodology for tackling one of the most controversial subjects in the Islamic world with HRH Prince Charles, The Prince of Wales

'report back' event, and mine was one of the successful case studies. I provided the Prince with brief information on my project, and he showed great interest in the number of mosques I covered and my methodology. We had an excellent meeting, and I appreciate his support and that of Mosaic. It was fantastic for Azerbaijan to be presented to the Prince, and I am honoured that I had chance to present on behalf of my country and to show the positive role of Islam. I felt he was inspired by my case study."

Also attending the event, Lionel Zetter, Director, TEAS, had the opportunity to

brief HRH The Prince of Wales on the background to Azerbaijan's involvement in the project. He spoke of the difficult early days of the nation's birth, when no sooner had it succeeded in its bloody struggle to cast off Soviet rule, than neighbouring Armenia invaded Nagorno-Karabakh and the seven surrounding districts, creating around 875,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. Fortunately, Azerbaijan's bountiful supplies of oil and gas has enabled the country to care for these dispossessed people, and to create a stable society where people of all faiths can happily coexist in an atmosphere of tolerance.

Iranian nuclear deal applauded

Azerbaijan has welcomed the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed between six countries – China, France, Germany, the Russian Federation, the UK and the US – and Iran, with the participation of the EU, according to a statement from the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry. This continued: "We also extend our heartfelt congratulations to the friendly and neighbourly people of Iran on the occasion of this achievement, and remain assured that this positive process will give additional impetus to the further development of the mutually beneficial partnership between Azerbaijan and Iran."

Novruz Mammadov, Deputy Chief, Azerbaijani Presidential Administration, commented: "In general, we consider that the application of sanctions against countries in connection with interstate relations is not a good, nor fair, step. In all cases, sanctions are a burden for the population of the countries upon which they are imposed. This hinders understanding, dialogue and co-operation between modern states and civilisations, and results in tension."

Iran and the P5+1 group finalised the JCPOA in Vienna on 14 July 2015. Under this, limitations have been placed on



John Kerry, US Secretary of State, exchanges dialogue with Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iranian Foreign Minister, after the International Atomic Energy Agency verified that Iran satisfied all conditions under the nuclear deal (Photo: AP)

Iranian nuclear activities in exchange for the removal of sanctions against the country.

New UK Ambassador to Azerbaijan

Dr Carole Crofts has been appointed as the new UK Ambassador to Azerbaijan, and will take up her position in May 2016. She will succeed H.E. Irfan Siddiq OBE, who will be transferred to another Diplomatic Service appointment. Dr Crofts joined the UK Foreign

and Commonwealth Office in 1987, and has previously served in Germany and Norway. Most recently, she has been the Director of Energy, Transport and Construction for UK Trade and Investment (UKTI).

Davos hosts Iranian–Azerbaijani meeting

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev met Mohammad Nahavandian, Head, Iranian Presidential Administration, on the sidelines of the *World Economic Forum* in Davos on 20 January. During the dialogue, the current high level of bilateral ties between the two countries was praised.

President Ilham Aliyev congratulated his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani and the Iranian people following the lifting of sanctions imposed on the country. President Aliyev said this would contribute towards the rapid development of co-operation between the two countries in all fields

President Aliyev noted that Azerbaijani–Iranian relations served the best interests of both countries, and would also contribute towards the strengthening of stability and security in the region. The sides broadly discussed the implementation of joint projects, particularly regarding the development of economic co-operation in the banking, transportation, industrial, power generation and other sectors.

Mr Nahavandian commented that the lifting of sanctions opened up broader opportunities for his country, adding that Azerbaijan



Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Mohammad Nahavandian, Head, Iranian Presidential Administration, spoke of the renewed momentum for economic collaboration following the lifting of western sanctions on Iran

and Iran could take advantage of this to realise new projects and further deepen their co-operation by involving other countries. They also underlined the importance of developing Azerbaijani–Iranian co-operation in the regional transportation sector. The sides also emphasised the significance of combining efforts against terrorism to maintain regional security and stability.

UN Secretary-General to visit Azerbaijan

A UN delegation led by Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General, will visit Azerbaijan on 20 February. According to the Azerbaijani Ministry of Culture and Tourism, this will be the second meeting of the organising committee for the *UN Alliance of Civilisations Seventh Global Forum*, to be hosted in Baku on 25–27 April (www.baku.unaoc.org).

Abulfaz Garayev, Chairman, Organising Committee, UN Alliance of Civilisations and Azerbaijani Minister of Culture and Tourism, said that, under the order of President Ilham Aliyev the heads of up to 50 states would be invited, and that senior state officials will be in attendance. Ban Ki-moon will also attend a youth-related event on 25 April as part of the Forum.

President Ilham Aliyev – Azerbaijani progress to be protected

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has promised that his country will maintain the progress that has been achieved in recent years and will continue to rapidly develop. The comments were made during a meeting addressing economic and social issues in the light of the reduced oil price. He stated: “We cannot give anyone the opportunity to use this situation for their own benefit.” The President commented that most oil-rich countries, which have been impacted by falling oil prices, have failed to increase social payments and wages, unlike in Azerbaijan.

“This is a very serious social step – it is a manifestation of our strong social policy, and hundreds of millions of AZN from the state budget will be spent for the implementation of this initiative. I believe there is no necessity to explain what it means in the

current circumstances, and it will probably prove necessary to consider this question again during the year. Of course, the issue depends on our capabilities.”

He then outlined the measures that have led to a significant reduction in the cost of flour and bread, explaining that this is a social initiative, and stressed that the government always considers the challenges for its people. He also promised to prosecute those seeking to take advantage, saying: “Those desiring to benefit from the current situation for economic or political interests will be punished. Instigators, dealers, and speculators are severely punished, and will be punished. We will protect the progress achieved in Azerbaijan in recent years and ensure the rapid development of our country.”

UAE–Azerbaijani ties cemented

H.H. Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, exchanged dialogue with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev during his visit to Dubai, UAE. Sheikh Hamdan Bin Mohammed Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai, and Sheikh Maktoum Bin Mohammed Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, Deputy Ruler of Dubai, were also in attendance.

During the meeting at the Zabeel Palace, they discussed issues related to peace, stability and economic development, especially in the Asian and Middle Eastern regions. They examined potential methods for further enhancing co-operation

between the countries regarding investment partnership, trade, tourist and cultural exchange and increasing the number of flights between UAE airports and Baku.

They initially recalled the historic visit to Baku by a high-ranking delegation led by Sheikh Mohammed Bin Abdullah Al-Gargawi, UAE Minister for Cabinet Affairs, and Shahin Mustafayev, Azerbaijani Minister for Economic Development, then went on to sign an Agreement on Institutional Co-operation in the field of Maritime Transport and a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Information and Communications Technologies.



Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Sheikh Hamdan Bin Mohammed Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai explored the potential for heightened collaboration

Azerbaijan is contributing to Syrian human development



Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev is welcomed at the entrance to the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre in Westminster

Speaking alongside representatives of 60 countries, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev outlined the active role of his country during the *Supporting Syria and the Region* conference in London on 4 February, hosted by the UN and the leaders of Germany, Kuwait, Norway and the UK. He recalled: “We are very sorry for the situation of Syrian refugees. In the first years of our independence in the early 1990s, neighbouring Armenia unleashed aggression against Azerbaijan, and my country suffered from a humanitarian disaster and crisis...at that time, my country was very young and poor. Around one million of the then eight million-strong Azerbaijani population were made jobless and homeless, being deprived of the opportunities that life has to offer – and my country had to accommodate the highest per capita rate of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world. We are grateful to the international humanitarian

organisations, and particularly the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), that supported us during a difficult moment in our history.”

President Ilham Aliyev went on to explain that Azerbaijan is now a donor country, providing financial assistance overseas, including that to Syrian refugees: “In 1994, Azerbaijan and Armenia established a ceasefire. Unfortunately, since that time at the negotiating table, no serious progress has been achieved on the settlement of the conflict. Despite the fact that the UN Security Council adopted four resolutions demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from the occupied territories of Azerbaijan, they have been ignored by Armenia for over 20 years.

“However, the achievement of the ceasefire provided us with the opportunity to develop.

Since then, the evolution of Azerbaijan has been rapid... Azerbaijan is now amongst the countries that have already contributed and will contribute to human development in Syria. But, most important, is the achievement of peace, a ceasefire, and a search for a political solution... This is the number one issue on our agenda. I am sure that today’s discussions will play an important role in the search for a political solution. Azerbaijan, as a country having financial and economic capacity, could achieve this not in terms of peace, but only following a ceasefire.”

He pledged that Azerbaijan would continue to support the displaced Syrian population: “We are grateful to EU countries for accepting the admission of Syrian refugees. I wish to reiterate that we have come here to promote peace and similar values. From this perspective, Azerbaijan will continue to play an important role.”

Azerbaijan – more welcoming to Jews than Israel

The US-based Jewish newspaper *Algemeiner* has published a glowing article focusing on Azerbaijani religious tolerance by Rabbi Barouk headlined *Azerbaijan: A Muslim nation against anti-Semitism*. This reads: “As 2015 came to a close, I found myself in Baku, Azerbaijan, because I wanted to better understand and appreciate the country’s friendship with Israel and the US. Thinking about food for Shabbat, I ventured out for a walk and found an indoor farm-to-table grocery store on one of the quaint and quiet residential streets... I suppose it might take first-hand experience to appreciate the intense contrast – and how, in that specific district of Baku, concern for my security never came to mind.

“The anxiety I felt in Jerusalem only the week prior – a practical fear over what is happening on the streets of Israel nearly every day – was totally and noticeably absent. Many strangers smiled, and a few even said ‘Shalom’ to me.

“Baku is the capital of a rare, promising nation, known as the global champion of healthy cultural and religious diversity, for which it is celebrated by its citizens of many faiths. Some in the media suggest that Azerbaijan is only so tolerant because it is secular. However this is a shallow interpretation of something very deep and actually very old... Religious life in Azerbaijan is vibrant and visible, with proud congregations and enviable



Malena Mard, Head of the EU Delegation to Azerbaijan, meets Shneur Segal, Chief Rabbi, Azerbaijan Community of European Jews on Europe Day in Baku (Photo: AFP/EU Neighbourhood Information Centre)

buildings for every religion and faith... The permeating values of faith, respect, and kindness surpass any boundaries between the various faiths, and promote inclusivity and mutual appreciation.” Go to <http://bit.ly/algemeinerazerbaijan> to read the full article.

Warlick discusses Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in London

James Warlick, US Co-Chair, OSCE Minsk Group, visited London for consultations at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) on 13 January, according to the UK Embassy in Azerbaijan. He went on to meet David Lidington, UK Minister for Europe, to discuss the work of the OSCE Minsk Group, followed by a roundtable discussion with experts on the region representing governmental divisions, NGOs and academia. Mr Warlick also discussed the ongoing Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh with Michael Tatham, Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, FCO.

Speaking to the Turkish *Daily Sabah* newspaper, he commented that the ongoing violence was “unacceptable”. He said that the US was calling for both sides to strictly adhere to the ceasefire regime and take every precaution to avoid civilian casualties. Commenting on the death toll, he continued: “Another way

to reduce tension is to increase people-to-people contacts, especially between the communities of Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenians and Azerbaijanis have lived side-by-side for generations.”

Meanwhile, Turkey has pledged ongoing allegiance with Azerbaijan. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Turkish Foreign Minister, commented that the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh also relates to Turkey, and that the “normalisation of Turkish–Armenian relations is impossible without the liberation of the occupied territories of Azerbaijan.”

Mr Warlick said that, as an OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair, the US would continue its active engagement with both countries, but ultimately the responsibility for peace falls on the shoulders of the presidents. He expanded: “Our longstanding policy, shared by the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs, is that a just settlement must be



David Lidington, UK Minister for Europe (left), was briefed on the latest developments in the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and the work of the OSCE Minsk Group by James Warlick, US Co-Chair, OSCE Minsk Group

based on international law... and the principles of the non-use of force or threat of force, territorial integrity, and self-determination.”

President meets EC Energy Vice-President and EBRD President

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev met Maros Sefcovic, Vice-President, Energy Union, European Commission, in Davos on 21 January. During the meeting, the sides stressed the importance of the Azerbaijani role in ensuring pan-European energy security, particularly regarding construction of the Southern Energy Corridor, which is currently receiving the full support of the European Commission.

The same day, President Aliyev met Suma Chakrabarti, President, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). They praised the level of EBRD–Azerbaijani co-operation, which now extends across 159 projects, and exchanged views on the economic reforms currently underway in Azerbaijan. The potential for deepening this relationship was emphasised, and new opportunities were discussed.

EU – peaceful resolution is a priority

The EU has reiterated the need for a swift conclusion of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. The statement was made on 18 January during a meeting of the EU–Armenia Co-operation Council in Brussels. It continued: “The EU confirmed that the status quo is inadmissible, and that peaceful resolution of this conflict remains a priority issue for the EU.” It continued: “We note that the situation regarding security along the ‘contact line’ and border between Armenia and Azerbaijan is a subject of serious concern. The EU repeats its call for restraint and

further participation in negotiations under the OSCE leadership. In addition, the EU has reiterated its support for talks with the mediation of the OSCE Minsk Group, aimed at conflict settlement.”

The EU also pledged to continue Armenian–Azerbaijani dialogue, including that at presidential level, saying: “In addition, the EU has reiterated its readiness to support peace-building efforts and also to assist in reconstruction and rehabilitation of conflict-affected regions, as soon as the peace agreement is reached.”

Charting the path of Armenian destruction

The annual report by the Azerbaijani Copyright Agency has revealed that 13 monuments of world importance, together with 292 and 330 of national and local significance, respectively, have been either destroyed or left to deteriorate in the Armenian-occupied Azerbaijani territories. According to the report, 804 cemeteries and 10 mosques have been looted and disparaged, and 22 museums and four galleries, containing 40,000 exhibits, have been destroyed, together with an estimated 4.6m books and precious manuscripts.



The 19th century mosque in Armenian-occupied Shusha has been debased (Photo: Marek Barankiewicz)

New ICT minister appointed

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has signed a decree regarding the appointment of Ramin Guluzade as Azerbaijani Minister of Communications and High Technologies. He was previously First Deputy Minister in the same ministry.

BP drilling horizontal well at the largest Azerbaijani oil field

BP Azerbaijan has revealed that it is drilling a new horizontal well on the Azeri–Chirag–Guneshli (ACG) block in the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea. The project will see a lateral bore for the C14 well being drilled from the Western Azeri platform. This should serve to increase oil production, and is expected to be complete by mid-March. During January–September 2015, 24m tonnes of light oil was produced from the ACG block, being only slightly below the production level of the previous year.



The music of Zaki Allal is minimalist, contemplative and transcendental

Zaki Allal – a polymath for peace

Born in 1987 in Tlemcen in Algeria – but now resident in California – Zaki Allal grew up and went on to study medicine in the coastal city of Oran. He initially studied the mandolin and violin, but quickly decided to switch to the piano. During his youth, he was particularly interested in the orchestral works of Dvorak, Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich. However, he soon developed a preference for Chopin and the Spanish composers Albeniz and Granados. His passion for the piano developed very rapidly, and he composed his first piece at the age of 15 years.

In 2006, he was invited to appear at the Cervantes Spanish Cultural Institute in Oran. During that evening, the Spanish Consul, touched by his talent, decided to encourage him to study classical music in Spain. Subsequently, he pursued studies in interpretation and composition at the Harrow School of Music in London and at the Royal Academy of Music, where he focused on development of his technique. He was selected by the US Ambassador to Algeria for a fellowship at the JFK Hall in Washington D.C.

Zaki defines his music as being contemporary new age, minimalist and classical. His album *Celestial* was released in Summer 2013, comprising nine pieces predominantly inspired by space and astronomy. Subsequently, the Office of Cultural Affairs for the US State Department described Zaki as a “talented artist and composer that contributed to the beauty of the world with his music and unique performances”.

To date, Zaki has undertaken two tours – one European, the other world. He notably appeared at Carnegie Hall in New York in 2013 and Steinway Hall in London in 2008. He also maintains a parallel career as a doctor and entrepreneur, working in many diverse research activities.

On 8 December, Zaki was invited to give a *Concert for Peace* in Paris at the the Cultural Service of the Azerbaijani Embassy to France, in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower. The concert came at an appropriate time, coming in the wake of the terrorist attacks in the French capital that claimed the lives of 130 people and injured scores of others. It was organised by the Ulduz Association and TEAS France. Neil Watson interrupted rehearsals to find out more about this unique performer:

We are currently living through a very difficult period, following the Paris attacks – in which I understand you lost a friend. The world has now become increasingly polarised between Muslim and Christian, and East and West. Why did you think it was necessary to hold the *Concert for Peace* at this time?

I think this is a very interesting time to organise this concert recital at the Cultural Service of the Azerbaijani Embassy. The reason is because, above all, I feel we have forgotten that we are human. Instead, we are increasingly focusing on the values or criteria that make us identify with a nation, or particular religion and ethnic group – which serve to separate us. We have forgotten the most important aspect – where

we come from and who we are – in fact, we are humans above everything. In my view, music is the unique language to transmit this. I was here in Paris during the night of the attacks and personally lost a friend. During the following day – 14 November – I remained at home and complied with the advice from the media. At the end, I said “why”? I just stopped for a minute, started to reflect and wondered why I should stay in my room. The terrorists have won if everybody is afraid and stays inside.

I then went out to the Place de la République like everyone else, and I stood there in defiance that night. I originate from Algeria, which has been devastated by numerous terrorist events for many decades, so I am very familiar with this situation. I grew up under this fear. Today, it is vitally important to refocus and look at life from an omniscient perspective, and music transcends all this because it surmounts language and other imagined divisions between us.

Music is another dimension, and it makes us realise that we are simply humans. Some of my compositions are directly inspired by human stories – either related to love, sadness, birth, or death. Those events are truly human, and are relevant to us, whether we are from Algeria, Chile or Russia – or anywhere else. We all live through these life events, and that’s the bottom line. I think the message that has to pervade the concert is that we are humans and we should look at our current situation from a higher perspective.



Zaki performs before a transfixed, multinational and interconfessional Parisian audience (Photos: Maya Baghirova)

How has the theme of peace shaped the programme we will hear tonight? Will you be performing pieces included on your first album *Celestial*, inspired by space and astronomy?

Absolutely – around 70 per cent of the pieces tonight will be coming from *Celestial* and the rest will be taken from my forthcoming second album, which will be called *Peace*. The reason again reflects our current issue, but also I have reached a maturity point in my life where I have undertaken a great deal of introspection, and am now able to understand certain ideas about myself, my life and the world in general, and the way I express this it through performing and musical composition. I am always looking for music that has a metaphysical nature.

You were born in Algeria, but you've also lived in the US and in France. Has the fact that you have lived amidst three different cultures enlightened your understanding of peace and acceptance?

Absolutely – it's just wonderful when you come from that area of the world. In the first instance, you are ethnically African – but you are also North African, Arabic and Mediterranean. However, there is also this undeniable influence of the Western world, as Algeria was a French colony for over 130 years, before gaining its independence in 1962. The Francophone influence remains very strong in my country.

However, I also had the opportunity to live in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, in the UK, before going to the US. I also stopped by in some other countries, including Spain,

Switzerland, and Sweden. I am rather a mixture of cultures, but I self-identify as a human being, above all. I like tortillas – in fact, food in general – and enjoy dancing salsa, which comes from my Mediterranean blood, I suppose, but I regard myself as a 'citizen of the world'.

The concert is being organised at the Azerbaijani Cultural Institute. As you are aware, Azerbaijan is a secular nation, where Muslims, Jews and numerous minority religions and ethnicities live side by side, and religious buildings of all types are constructed with state finance. Do you believe that the Azerbaijani concept of tolerance should be better understood?

In my view, this is necessary – in fact, tolerance should generally be understood. Unfortunately I was reading the news today whilst travelling to Paris, and became aware of the terrible things that were being said in the US. Due to politics, amongst many other reasons, we are becoming decreasingly human. Humanity is the key word today.

We are also declining in tolerance, whether prejudice is against the Jews, African natives, Muslims or any minority – today we are living in a world where communication and information circulates so fast, and technology empowers individuals. We are travelling very quickly, and are living in a world that's globalised. I was born in Algeria, but can live in the US as equally as an American citizen, as can a French citizen live in Brazil and speak Portuguese. We are living in an era today where information is in abundance, and

communications and technologies can go everywhere, so tolerance – not hatred – should be spreading worldwide.

A phone is technology – it can either be used to call 911 for an ambulance, or may be used to activate a bomb. The human level determines the usage of the technology, and the message has to be spread accordingly. This concert is partially aimed at transmitting this message. The meaning should impact human souls, hearts, and brains. We should become more tolerant, and just share music and love between humans – to me, that's the most important thing.

I understand that Chopin and such Spanish composers as Albeniz and Granados had a particular impact on you. How would you describe your music? Is it completely notated, or is there an element of improvisation?

I would describe my music as a 50:50 mix. Much of my music is improvised, but most of my compositions come from my inner soul. I never compose when I don't feel in the mood to do so – it is not a mechanical activity. When I sit down and want to play something, I really feel it – whether it's *Dancing Star* or *Aurora Borealis* or any of my other compositions – all really emanate from my own experiences. For example, *Aurora Borealis* is a piece I composed when I first saw the Northern Lights. At that moment, I was unable to believe that something so harmonious, perfect and beautiful could exist in the universe, and be witnessed with my naked eyes. The moment after I saw this phenomenon, I started playing *Aurora Borealis*. The piece

is very expressive and I think that's why I intrinsically love Chopin's music. He really expresses himself and, in my view, he is a poet of the piano.

Parallel with your musical career, you are doctor/surgeon focusing on neurology, radiology, surgery, cardiology, and particularly the preservation of organs. What are the objectives of the Organ Preservation Alliance?

The Organ Preservation Alliance is a non-profit-making biotechnology start-up that enables breakthroughs in organ bank solutions. Today, we are living in a world where human organs are extremely scarce. We lack donors for people suffering from heart failure or another malfunctioning organs. However, even if we have enough organs, there is a risk of rejection. A combination of rejection, a long waiting-list, and logistical issues means that there are many situations where organs arrive late, if at all. This start-up is enabling scientists and institutions to develop technologies to better preserve those organs for an indefinite period.

We aim to create banks of organs so that one can be taken off the shelf and implanted on-the-go. We are working with scientists, research labs and influential institutions specialising in organ donations to make this a reality. Another cultural

and ethical issue is persuading people to become organ donors.

However, the Organ Preservation Alliance surmounts these issues – this is because we are working on methods whereby people will be able to grow and store their own organs, due to parallel developments happening in regenerative medicine using stem cell technology. The process involves taking a cell from the patient's skin, using nanotechnology to graft it to a stem cell, so it is taken backwards, and regenerate any organ. Ultimately, the finalised organ contains the patient's DNA and is their organ. Ultimately, this overcomes any cultural or ethical barriers, as recipients will accept their own organs, both physically and mentally.

Regardless of race and religion – people accept their own organs, although receiving one from someone else presents something of an issue. Is the Alliance also involved in the development of animal-grown organs?

We are not involved with animal-grown organ development or the harvesting of animal organs, but a great deal of development and research is currently happening in this field. For example, scientists are also working on organs propagated using Lab-on-a-Chip (LOC) technology, making it possible to mimic an organ inside a small chip to

undertake drug development for cancer research. I think this marks a fascinating progression.

There are interesting parallels regarding the negative reaction to organ preservation and organ transplantation in both Muslim and Christian nations. People's reaction is absolutely the same – if you labelled one religion as 'X' and the other as 'Y', or simply removed labels from religion, you would be unable to see who's who, or who's from where. This brings us back to our original premise – the label of your religion is immaterial – you are human at the end of the day, and your reaction towards organ transplantation is going to be the same. The prejudice against organ transplantation is purely in the human brain and at a human level. Likewise the acceptance of your own organ, grown using stem cells, is at a human level. The human brain is at work – not religion – it's all about what's happening inside, and I transpose this attitude to politics, tolerance and some other aspects in life.

How are you working with the Singularity University, where you represent all Francophone countries?

The Singularity University is an educational centre based in the San Francisco Bay area of Silicon Valley and is an education centre that focuses on the most rapidly-developing technologies, such as artificial intelligence, big data, robotics and synthetic biology, to solve the greatest challenges in the world, including health issues, education, poverty, security, and ensuring water and food access. Various people with numerous specialisations are selected from across the world each year. We operate a summer-long programme, and have other programmes that are shorter and more focused, running throughout the year.

I joined the Singularity University five years ago, as a student, and was fortunate to receive a full scholarship to go and study at the university in the NASA Research Park in Ames, California. This experience changed my life, providing me with the opportunity to work on several medical innovation projects and to become a teaching fellow on campus in the areas of medicine and neuroscience.

I then became the ambassador of the institution to France and Francophone nations, with a mission to 'import' the educational concept of the Singularity University to France. I believe this mission has been a success, as the educational concept is now well-established and has become renowned in France.



Celestial, Zaki's debut album, took its point of departure from space and astronomy



Zaki's unique music is intended to affect human souls, hearts, and brains

We have now launched an innovation competition programme. This acts as a platform to identify those outstanding entrepreneurs, leaders, scientists and engineers with the most innovative ideas that could positively impact millions of lives, both globally and locally, during the next three to five years. The winner of each competition is invited to attend the Global Solutions Programme (GSP) free-of-charge. Another person will receive a scholarship, in the same way as myself, and the circle will be completed.

Today, a growing, outstanding Singularity University alumni community of innovators and entrepreneurs exists in France, and it is time for me to pass the baton to a new person in the country who will take the presence of the Singularity University in France to a new level.

As a modern polymath, do you believe that art and science complement each other?

Art is a science and science is an art. I absolutely believe that it is impossible to achieve anything without viewing and considering concepts from all available angles. As a medical doctor and physician, I am aware that diseases are becoming less general and more complex, with a greater need for specialists. For example, dispersal of a brain aneurysm requires the use of a radiologist, neurologist, intervention radiologist and anaesthetist. A large team of specialised physicians will be needed to approach a single aneurysm

of just a few millimetres in width. I believe the same is true of neuroscience.

Music plays its role in this – hence the development of music relaxation and music therapy. I strongly believe that art complements science if you are a physician. Music can help you study and relax. Surgeon colleagues often ask for my music, as they find it helps them concentrate whilst they are in the operating room. It helps them relax and focus, and can even be beneficial to the patient if they are awake during surgery. Music can also be used to relax patients prior to surgery.

Even the lessons we learn from music can be transposed into medicine and normal life. Life can be analogised as a musical piece – it can go fast, it can go slow, there's a tempo, there are fortes and pianissimi, and you just learn to understand life better. So, yes, I think if you're a polymath, or just try to do several things at a time, it makes you richer. It enables you to understand people more effectively, in a similar way to being born in a country and living in another nation. It helps you to build bridges between cultures and understand the true meaning of tolerance.

To me, music is also one of the oldest technologies, yet one of the most efficient in impacting the world, because it can play on emotions if it's very poetic, yet may also be very mathematical and logical, as with the compositions of Bach.

Music provides a new dimension and there's a space for a very personal vision. My music just reflects who I am, and that which is inside me. Many people are actually very good in composing extremely mathematical and precise classical music, and this really reflects who they are.

Similarly, if you understand musical parts and comprehend the science, you're the best-placed person to build the bridges between those two spheres. I think there are multiple areas, and I feel happier when I'm multitasking. I feel quite bored when I do one thing at any one time. There is a danger of insularity, if subjects are regarded as having a finite start and end – it's best if you actually can see where the overlaps occur.

When will *Peace*, your new album, be released? Will you go on a release tour?

It will probably be released at the end of 2017, or early 2018. I will embark on an international concert tour. I am still composing, and am not rushing into the recording studio. The release date is rather approximate, and the compositional style is quite disparate to the first album. However, the pieces are more reflective, as they focus on the message of peace. When complete, the album will be distributed online, and in France, North Africa and Spain.

Go to www.zakiallal.com to experience the great artistry of Zaki Allal.

Ali and Nino in the spotlight

Ali and Nino, written (originally in German) by the enigmatic Kurban Said in 1937, is currently in the public focus due to the imminent release of the \$20m (£13.9m) Hollywood adaptation of this love story, directed by the UK-based Asif Kapadia. It was therefore natural that Dash Arts – a UK-based arts organisation focusing on post-Soviet countries – should organise an event entitled *Ali and Nino in Baku* on 16 March at the Rich Mix, 35–47, Bethnal Green Road, London, E1 6LA at 19.30hrs.

This free event will feature a screening of the film *Baku: The City of Ali and Nino*, directed by Teresa Chermas, made as a companion piece to the feature, which tells the story of the real-life historical events that form the backdrop to the novel, such as the first oil boom, the Great War, and the birth of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR).

The screening of the documentary will be followed by a discussion with Teresa Chermas, Oscar-winning *Ali and Nino* screenwriter Christopher Hampton and Thomas de Waal, a Senior Associate with Carnegie Europe, specialising in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region, being hosted by Josephine Burton, Artistic Director, Dash Arts. E-mail molly@dasharts.org.uk to book a place.

Meanwhile, the cinematic adaptation of *Ali and Nino* has received its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah – the largest festival for independent film in the US.

The film was reviewed by Ed Frankl on the *Little White Lies* website, who wrote: “Taking its cue from sweeping historical epics



Filming of *Ali and Nino* underway amidst the cobble streets of the Icheri Sheher (Old City) of Baku

like *The English Patient* and *Doctor Zhivago*, *Ali and Nino* centres on a romance in the midst of a continent-defining war... the film opens in 1914 in Baku, the oil-rich Azerbaijani capital, and ends with the declaration of the Azerbaijan SSR in 1920, Kapadia taking us on a journey consumed by a star-crossed love-story between headstrong Muslim aristocrat (Adam Bakri) and Christian Georgian princess (Maria Valverde). Their relationship is inevitably plagued by religious differences, disapproving parents and revolutionary fervour brought on by the onset of conflict in Russian-controlled Azerbaijan in 1914...

“Kapadia gets points for the luscious photography of the Caucasus mountains (photographed by Nuri Bilge Ceylan regular Gökhan Tiryaki), to which Ali and Nino escape, and a believably rugged turn-of-the-century Baku (filmed in Azerbaijan and Turkey)...the ADR, the short-lived independent state created before the Soviets took the country, was the first republic in the Muslim world and the first to grant women universal suffrage.” The film will receive its UK release in April 2016.

Deco Ensemble headline at the Salle Cortot

The prestigious 500-seater Salle Cortot in Paris – named after its eponymous founder, the pianistic maestro Alfred Cortot, who also established the adjacent École Normale de Musique de Paris – resounded to the sound of nuevo tango during the performance by the Deco Ensemble on 26 January. This was organised by the Animato organisation which focuses on the development of young artists. The evening featured leading Azerbaijani violinist Sabina Rakcheyeva, the first Azerbaijani graduate from the Juilliard School in New York and Arts and Culture Advisor, TEAS, alongside Bartosz Glowacki (accordion), Ricardo Gosalbo (piano), Rob Luft (guitar) and Elena Marigómez (double-bass). The

programme featured three pieces by Astor Piazzolla, who studied composition in Paris under Nadia Boulanger, *La Muerte del Angel*, *Milonga del Angel* and *Tango del Diablo*, alongside two pieces by contemporary Argentine composer Ramiro Gallo entitled *Las Malenas* and *El ultimo kurdo*. Also included on the programme was the languorous and nostalgic *Encuentro*, the titular track to the Deco Ensemble's début album, performed before the Paris-based Argentine composer Gustavo Beytelmann, who was seated in the audience.

After much spirited audience clapping, stamping and cries of 'Bravissimo!', the ensemble responded with an hypnotic



The Deco Ensemble, featuring Sabina Rakcheyeva (second from right), meet composer Gustavo Beytelmann, whose *Encuentro* they performed during their enthusiastically-received Parisian concert

encore of *A Todo Trapo* by contemporary tango composer Emiliano Greco. Visit www.decoensemble.com to hear the music of the Deco Ensemble and to buy a copy of *Encuentro*.

Both sides of Azerbaijani music heard in Portcullis House

The prestigious Atlee Suite of Portcullis House – part of the UK Houses of Parliament – re-echoed to the sound of both Azerbaijani mugham and pop music following the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Anglo-Azerbaijani Society on 28 January. Following the presentations by UK Co-Chair Lord German and Professor Nargiz Pashayeva, his Azerbaijani counterpart, Tabriz-born Babek Atesh took centre-stage on the 11-string Azerbaijani tar to perform the mesmeric mughams *Simai Shems* and *Bayati Shiraz*. He was followed by 14-year-

old Lewisham-born kamancha player Aida Mamedova, who played *Lachin*, *Sari Gelin* and a selection from Uzeyir Hajibeyli's 1911 operetta *O olmasin bu olsun (If not this one, the other one)*.

The finale was provided by the half-Azerbaijani 20-year-old Ealing-born pop sensation Elyar Fox (born Elyar Afshari), whose 2014 début single *Do It All Over Again* reached fifth place in the UK singles chart. He performed several of his folk-influenced compositions, concluding with



Pop phenomenon Elyar Fox is proud of both his Azerbaijani and British heritage

an introspective take on Gloria Gaynor's disco anthem *I Will Survive*. For more information, see his Facebook at www.facebook.com/ElyarFox.

PACE votes to condemn occupying Armenia over Sarsang Reservoir policy

On 26 January, a staggering 98 MPs voted in favour of the adoption of a Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) resolution entitled *Inhabitants of the frontier regions of Azerbaijan are deliberately denied access to water*, for which the rapporteur was Milica Markovic MP (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

Mrs Markovic clarified her condemnation of the Armenian occupation: “The title of my report concerns the region between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Territorially, it is the region of Azerbaijan, but in fact it is under the control of Armenia.” She also went on to condemn the ineffectiveness of the OSCE Minsk Group, which has unsuccessfully been attempting to achieve a negotiated peace for nearly 22 years, saying: “The subject of my report has been controversial in the past few months because of the issue of the competence of the OSCE Minsk Group, which is tasked with finding a potential resolution to the conflict. As we know, that group has been doing its work, but 20 years have passed and it has not found a specific solution, nor is there any resolution so far to the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia.”

Speaking of the 40-year-old Sarsang Reservoir – at 125m, the highest Azerbaijani water reservoir, located 726m above sea level – she said: “Nagorno-Karabakh is under the control of Armenia, and Lower Karabakh is under the control of Azerbaijan. In Lower Karabakh, there are six districts and six cities that have to use the water resources. They have to be provided with water from the Sarsang Reservoir. The intention in building the reservoir was to provide the local population with drinking water and to irrigate the region.



PACE has firmly asserted that Armenia is responsible for the humanitarian threat presented by the beautiful, yet deadly, Sarsang Reservoir

“The region of Nagorno-Karabakh and Lower Karabakh is made up of plains and arable land that require human intervention – it has to be irrigated. Today, it is not possible to do that. The Sarsang Reservoir’s main channel has two branches, north and south, which provide water for irrigating the whole region, and drinking water for the population, but 80 per cent of this is under Armenian control.”

Mrs Markovic went on to explain that her fact-finding mission had visited the six affected Azerbaijani regions in August 2015, but had been unable to gain access to Armenia or the occupied part of the Sarsang Reservoir, due to the obstreperous behaviour of the Armenian authorities. The adopted resolution text at <http://bit.ly/pacesarsang> firmly asserts that the region is occupied by Armenia, and that the Armenian authorities are responsible for this humanitarian crisis. Article seven states that PACE requests:

“the immediate withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from the region concerned, thus allowing:

- access by independent engineers and hydrologists to carry out a detailed on-the-spot survey
- global management, throughout the catchment area, of the use and upkeep of the Sarsang water resources
- international supervision of the irrigation canals, the state of the Sarsang and Madagiz dams, the schedule of water releases during the autumn and winter, and aquifer overexploitation
- the Armenian authorities to cease using water resources as tools of political influence or an instrument of pressure benefiting only one of the parties to the conflict.”

The Sarsang Reservoir was built to provide residents with water and to irrigate agriculture. However, since the Armenian occupation in 1992, the regions near the ‘contact line’ have been deliberately deprived of water. Armenia also intentionally uses the water reservoir to subject the six regions downstream to flooding by releasing runoff in winter months, thereby causing serious damage to the agriculture of the nearby regions.

Two Azerbaijani soldiers killed on the ‘contact line’

Nahid Safarov, an Azerbaijani soldier, was killed on the ‘contact line’ between Azerbaijan and the Armenian-occupied territories on 29 January, according to the Azerbaijani Defence Ministry. The ministry offered its deep condolences to

the bereaved, and expressed concern that international organisations only react to the news of losses on the Armenian side.

Following this, another soldier named Imran Mirzoev was killed during

skirmishes on 3 February on the ‘contact line’ that also claimed the lives of three Armenian soldiers, according to the Azerbaijani Ministry of Defence. The Armenian Ministry of Defence refuted the reports.

German OSCE Chair Steinmeier rejects the concept of the ‘frozen conflict’

Writing in the *Huffington Post*, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, German Foreign Minister and current Chairperson-in-Office, OSCE, has stressed that Germany seeks an intensification in the negotiations regarding the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group. He wrote: “Armed clashes on the ‘contact line’ and the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan give us cause for concern.”

He stressed that another important step towards achieving settlement is to create a mechanism for the investigation of ceasefire violations, and that he does not consider the

unresolved conflicts in Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh and the South Caucasus as ‘frozen’. Mr Steinmeier wrote: “Every year, they (the conflicts) continue to bring difficulties to the people affected, and bring stagnation to the region. We want to stabilise the ceasefire, build trust and improve people’s lives by taking small, but real steps, such as increasing economic exchange.” Earlier, H.E. Heidrun Tempel, German Ambassador to Azerbaijan, pledged that Germany would pay more attention to the settlement of such longstanding conflicts in 2016, and particularly the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

President Ilham Aliyev – optimistic in Davos



Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev (fourth from left) sits alongside representatives from Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Russia and other energy-producing countries at the World Economic Forum in Davos

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev delivered a resolutely optimistic speech during *The New Energy Equation* session at the *World Economic Forum* in Davos on 21 January. He explained that the Azerbaijani economy remained stable and sustainable, and despite the drop in oil prices, the country has retained its social package.

He continued: “It was difficult to see the oil price further reducing, but given the situation today, a decreased oil price will not be surprising.” President Aliyev added that, although Azerbaijan is not a big oil producer, more co-ordination between OPEC members and large non-OPEC members was necessary to avoid a glut of oil in the market, and that the level of mutual trust required enhancement. He continued: “If it doesn’t happen, OPEC itself will not make a decision, and without this we will have this situation, and just wait until the oil price bottoms out.”

President Aliyev stressed the need for Azerbaijan to invest in social and industrial infrastructure, yet simultaneously maintain investments in oil and gas exploration. He explained that Azerbaijan had already begun financial sector and economic reforms, focusing on non-oil exports, but the latest developments had brought their plans forward, saying: “We were trying to prepare ourselves for this period [to come] in 15–20–25 years, but

we have to do this now. I think that we will cope with this situation. Our foreign debt accounts for only 12 per cent of GDP, and our foreign currency reserves are almost the same level as our GDP. I am sure we will manage the crisis but, of course, we want to have a predictable future and plan our budget for the next year.”

Commenting on the devaluation of the Azerbaijani currency (AZN), President Aliyev outlined that several factors have had an impact. He noted that, over the past decade, the AZN had been artificially inflated, gaining weight against the US\$. He added that AZN1 had equated to US\$1.3, so the first change in the national currency rate was to return AZN1 to US\$1. The President explained that the second rate change was mainly attributable to the devaluation of national currencies in neighbouring countries, resulting in Azerbaijani goods becoming non-competitive, and added that this was an additional burden on the country’s budget.

He expanded: “We tried to resist as much as we could, and lost some of our national bank reserves, but had to take this measure. Naturally, this caused some concern, as it was immediately reflected by the rise in consumer prices, which we import, since we are still a goods-import dependent country. However, this is now over, and I believe that economic

development in Azerbaijan will be sustainable.”

The President recalled that Azerbaijan has had one of the fastest growing economies in the world, growing by over 300 per cent in a decade. He reflected: “This was too much. Now the cycle has turned but, with our currency reserves, we will manage the situation.” He stressed that oil prices are cyclic, saying: “I remember the time when we launched our main oil development project in 1994, the oil price then was \$12 (£8.33) a barrel, and this seemed very normal. When we were planning the development, I remember that we foresaw an optimistic scenario, which was \$22 (£15.28). Now we are very close to this price.”

The President expressed hope that the market would stabilise, as the oil sector needs investment, and said that the world had experienced the greatest ever percentage drop of investments in the oil sector during the past year. He stated that it had reached its trough: “so, without that, the price will definitely go up.”

President Aliyev commented that for companies, investors, and governments, a price of US\$60–70 (£41.7–48.6) per barrel would be perfect, and predicted that this would occur around 2017. He concluded: “This second half of this year will be a period of stabilisation, and I hope we will see growth.”

Dentons Client Alerts following AZN devaluation

Dentons Baku office – a TEAS member company – has issued several Client Alerts in the wake of new laws passed in the Milli Majlis (Azerbaijani Parliament) following the recent AZN currency devaluation. These relate to state guarantees for loans to deposit

insurance funds, an extension to deposit insurance coverage by the Central Bank of Azerbaijan, currency controls, and incentives to promote investments. Go to <http://bit.ly/dentonscurrencycontrol> and <http://bit.ly/dentonsinvestmentpromo> to read the alerts.

Movsumov – a strong base to withstand shocks

According to Shahmar Movsumov, Executive Director, State Oil Fund of the Azerbaijani Republic (SOFAZ), Azerbaijan has a strong base to withstand shocks. The statement was made in his letter, published on 5 February in the *Financial Times*.

Mr Movsumov concurs that the majority of hydrocarbon-exporting countries – including Azerbaijan – are experiencing difficulties associated with the slowdown of the world economy and drastic decline in oil prices. He asserts: “However, Azerbaijan has a strong base to withstand these shocks and to accelerate the pace of economic reforms to further diversify the economy away from oil and gas. During the past decade, the Azerbaijani economy has grown threefold, non-oil gross domestic product has increased five times, the poverty level dropped from 49 per cent to five per cent, and the entire infrastructure in the country has been completely rebuilt.”

He continues on an optimistic note: “Government indebtedness stands at just over 12 per cent of GDP. We have accumulated substantial foreign currency reserves of about \$39bn (£27.1bn) (73 per cent of GDP) that provide a comfortable cushion against any possible adverse external and internal shocks. The country



Shahmar Movsumov, Executive Director, SOFAZ, has written optimistically about the future of the Azerbaijan economy – despite the unprecedented downturn in oil prices

possesses sizeable proven oil and gas reserves that will continue to provide substantial revenues to the government for years to come. Most importantly, there is a strong intention and commitment on the part of the government to prepare the economy for the new challenges of the globalised world.”

World Bank framework for 2015–20 unveiled

Speaking to CBC, Larisa Leshchenko, Country Manager: Azerbaijan, World Bank, has revealed that the framework for Azerbaijan during 2015–20 will have the pre-eminent objective of ensuring sustainable economic development in Azerbaijan and increasing resilience to potential shocks from different external factors.

She noted that the strategy is based on two pillars. The first of these concerns improving the quality of and access to public services in Azerbaijan, and the second is about improving the business environment and opportunities for the private sector to develop, grow and contribute to the prosperity of the country. These would serve to reduce extreme poverty and eliminate financial inequalities.

According to Mrs Leshchenko, the World Bank is looking at

the continuation of infrastructural development in Azerbaijan, including potential support to the Azerishiq Company, which distributes power to the Azerbaijani regions.

In addition to the infrastructural projects, the World Bank is planning to continue implementation and provide funding to improve the living conditions of the estimated 875,000 refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) who are the ongoing victims of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

These World Bank initiatives have gained particular importance in the light of the current reduced oil price. It has also advised the Azerbaijani government on various remediating measures. Mrs Leshchenko added that the World Bank is ready to share its experience acquired in other countries that have faced similar conditions and situations.

ASAN – facilitating customs clearance

Over the past three years, the ASAN xidmet network of nine IT-based service centres – one-stop-shops that offer 280 services from 10 ministries – has gained a reputation for efficiency and transparency, spearheading the fight against bureaucracy and corruption. Complementing the existing services, ASAN is now offering its customers numerous customs services, following a meeting between Aydin Aliyev, Chair, Azerbaijan State Customs Committee and Inam Kerimov, Chairman, State Agency for Public

Service and Social Innovations under the President of Azerbaijan.

ASAN xidmet will soon facilitate electronic declarations, including the issuance of official certificates for import–export operations, and extensions to the amount of time that temporarily imported cars can remain in the country. Information kiosks for the Azerbaijani State Customs Committee will also be installed in ASAN centres in the future. Go to www.asan.gov.az for more information on ASAN.

BP prepares Shah Deniz III project implementation

Speaking to reporters, Grey Riley, Vice-President: Exploration and Development, BP Azerbaijan has revealed that his company is currently in the process of conducting a three-dimensional seismological survey at the Azerbaijani Shah Deniz gas and condensate field to obtain data regarding untapped deposits, in anticipation of the third phase of development.

He explained: “The two-dimensional seismological survey has been conducted in the shallow waters around the Absheron

Peninsula at a sea depth of more than 15m. During this survey, Caspian Geophysical, our contractor, also undertook a three-dimensional seismological survey on the Shah Deniz field using the Gilavar vessel. This has enabled us to collect certain data on the opportunities for further development of this field and analysis of this data will begin in the fourth quarter of 2016.”

Mr Riley commented that this issue had not been a priority hitherto, as the

company has been focusing on the Shah Deniz II development. He explained: “The interpretation of data for the third phase has not been a priority. However, we are constantly looking for opportunities to further develop the Shah Deniz field.”

BP Azerbaijan has resolutely expressed its intention to continue co-operation on the third phase of development of the Shah Deniz gas field, working in conjunction with the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijani Republic (SOCAR).



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