

TEAS

M A G A Z I N E



Culture | Public Affairs | Business



RADIK ISAYEV – A GOLDEN ACHIEVEMENT

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09 / 2016

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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.

Win £100 of Amazon vouchers!

Firstly, our congratulations go to Araz Borchali, winner of the competition in the August 2016 edition.

To stand a chance of winning £100 of Amazon vouchers, simply answer the following 10 questions, the answers to which will be found in this issue of the magazine. In the case of a tie, a draw will be made. Previous winners are ineligible to enter, as are TEAS employees and their families. Please send all entries to editor@teas.eu by 17.00hrs (GMT) on 4 October:

1. Which Azerbaijani taekwondo fighter won gold in the Rio2016 Summer Olympics?
2. Who is the new Belgian Ambassador to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkmenistan?
3. Can you name the ethnically Azerbaijani region of Georgia?
4. Which tenor was the great-grandfather of Azerbaijani jazz pianist Isfar Sarabski?
5. Which American drummer performed with Azerbaijani pianist Elchin Shirinov at the Maison des Cultures du Monde in Paris?
6. Who is the Azerbaijani Defence Minister?
7. Who is the current Prime Ministerial Trade Envoy to Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Iraq?
8. What is the VAT rate in Azerbaijan?
9. How long is the North-South Transport Corridor?
10. In which year was the Gabala International Music Festival established?

Upcoming Event For full details of all TEAS events, go to www.teas.eu/upcoming_events

4 October: Official opening: TEAS Benelux new office

TEAS Benelux, 8th Floor, Boulevard Bischoffsheim 11, 1000 Brussels, Belgium. 18.00hrs. RSVP to jonathan.lukas@teas.eu.

The TEAS Benelux office is now moving to new premises, and friends of Azerbaijan – either located in mainland Europe, or regularly visiting there on business – are invited to attend the opening. Guests of Honour: H.E. Didier Reynders, Belgian Vice-Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs; H.E. Fuad Isgandarov, Azerbaijani Ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg and Head of the Azerbaijani delegation to the EU; Marc Verwilghen, Director, TEAS Benelux.

20 October: Azerbaijan Tourism Forum Brussels

Brussels Press Club Europe, Rue Froissart 95, 1040 Brussels, Belgium. 14.00hrs. RSVP before 10 October to aygun.ismayilova@teas.eu. Registration is complete once you receive confirmation from TEAS.

TEAS Benelux invites all tourism professionals to attend this outstanding event showcasing the latest developments and opportunities in the burgeoning Azerbaijani tourism industry.

18 November: Elchin Shirinov Trio (part of the London Jazz Festival)

Pizza Express Jazz Club, 10 Dean Street, London, W1D 3RW. 20.30hrs. Call +44 (0)20 74394962 to book tickets.

TEAS is pleased to support this performance by the outstanding Azerbaijani pianist Elchin Shirinov. Seamlessly blending pianistic pyrotechnics and mugham into an intoxicating aural ethnojazz experience, these gigs come on the tail of successful performances in Reims, the Festival Jazz à Saint-Germain-des-Prés Paris and the Spice of Life and Vortex Jazz Clubs in London. The other trio members are Andrea Di Biase (bass) and Dave Hamblett (drums).

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.



Lionel Zetter,
Director,
TEAS

From the TEAS Director

Our front cover shows martial artist Radik Isayev, who won a gold medal in taekwondo at the Rio2016 Olympics. Altogether, Azerbaijani athletes achieved 18 medals.

The summer was a busy one for the burgeoning Azerbaijani tourism industry. Positive publicity generated by the Baku2015 European Games and Formula One – plus the threat of terrorism in many Mediterranean bordering countries – meant a sharp rise in the number of tourists from the Gulf and other regions. The designation of Baku as one of the top ten most liveable cities in the world by *The Economist* has also helped to boost visitor numbers.

Stratfor has highlighted Azerbaijan's increasing importance as a regional power. Completion of the North–South Transport Corridor will also establish Azerbaijan as a crucial bridge between Iran and Russia.

On the business front, tax reforms aimed at making the system commensurate with the law in OECD states have been initiated. We also look forward to the forthcoming CATBIG/British Expertise briefing from Baroness Nicholson, Prime Ministerial Trade Envoy to Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Iraq.

In a historic landmark achievement, the ACG oil field – run by a BP-led consortium – produced its three billionth barrel of oil.

On the cultural side we have an in-depth report on the world-renowned Gabala music festival, which this year featured musicians and singers from Austria, Israel, Russia, Spain, Cuba, Ukraine and Italy, alongside the crème de la crème of Azerbaijani talent. The historic Old City – a popular tourist destination and UNESCO World Heritage site – now has free wifi throughout.

Sadly, despite mounting international pressure, Armenia has still refused to release Dilham Asgarov and Shahbaz Guliyev, two Azerbaijani civilians who were captured and falsely imprisoned whilst tending the graves of their relatives in the occupied territories.

Lionel Zetter, Director, TEAS



Gold medal-winning
Radik Isayev revels in the
enormity of his achievement

Azerbaijan goes for gold

The Azerbaijani Olympic Team competed in the Rio2016 Summer Olympics from 5–21 August, where it fielded 56 athletes across 18 sporting disciplines. Altogether, the Azerbaijani horde comprised 18 medals, of which 10 were bronze and seven were silver, with one gold being achieved by taekwondo fighter Radik Isayev in the +80kg category when he defeated Abdoulrazak Issoufou Alfaga of Niger by a margin of 6–2. This came in the wake of Isayev achieving gold in the 2014 European Championships.

Silver medallists included Rustam Orujov in the men's 73kg judo and Elmar Gasimov in the men's 100kg judo; Mariya Stadnik in the women's freestyle 48kg wrestling; Lorenzo Sotomayor in the men's light welterweight boxing and Khetag Gazyumov in the men's freestyle 97kg wrestling.

Wifi in the Old City

The Azerbaijani Ministry of Communications and High Technologies has launched a new project for the provision of free internet access in some of the most popular areas of Baku. This wifi provision project will include

the Seaside National Park and Fountain Square, the Baku Old City and State Flag Square. The main objective is to facilitate flexible working and communications for the inhabitants of Baku and tourists.

Healthy living is easy

The Republican Medical Diagnostic Centre (RMDC) of Azerbaijan will soon offer health checkups across the ASAN Xidmet Service Centre network – operated by the State Agency for Public Service and Social Innovations under the Azerbaijani President. The first check-up will be conducted at Baku ASAN Service Centre No.1. Following the six-minute examinations, the results will be sent to citizens via SMS.

Azerbaijani language and literature to be taught in Tabriz University

In a landmark move, it has been revealed that Azerbaijani language and culture will be taught in Tabriz University from September – located in the capital of the Iranian East Azerbaijan Province. According to APA, Mohammad Farhadi, Iranian Science, Research and Technology Minister, commented: "We have told universities to, if possible, make student admission announcements on the subject of the language and culture of Azerbaijan. Tabriz University has said it can accept students for this subject. Efforts are underway in this direction."

The Minister added that the Iranian Organisation for the Assessment of State Education would publish information on the new faculty in student admission booklets. He commented: "Students who have chosen to study this subject will be able to get information from these booklets about admission requirements, vacancies, and universities."

Mr Farhadi noted that the Iranian side is currently negotiating with its Azerbaijani counterpart on the issue of exchanging scientific delegations, adding that mutual visits would take place for this purpose in the near future. He continued: "One of the areas in which we wish to co-operate is the issue of establishing Azerbaijani–Iranian joint educational centres. It's gratifying that the two countries enjoy such a high level of bilateral ties."

The Economist – Baku in the Top 10 of the world’s most liveable cities

Leading UK journal *The Economist* has added Baku to its Top 10 of cities with the most improved liveability. The *Global Liveability Ranking 2016* says that the Azerbaijani capital has become the ninth most improved city in the world by improving its liveability index (+1.6 per cent in the rating for the last five years), eclipsing the city of Honolulu (Hawaii, US), which closes the Top 10. The best city in the world, with the most improved liveability is Tehran, the Iranian capital (+5 per cent over five years).

However, both Baku (103rd place of 140 cities) and Tehran (126th place) are still far from Melbourne, which has been on top for the past six years. Conversely, Moscow has lost 5.6 per cent and Kiev –25.1 per cent in the rating over the past five years. The criteria for the indices measures about 30 qualitative and quantitative factors in five main categories – stability, healthcare, culture and environment, education, and infrastructure.



The cityscape of Baku has been transformed into a warm, resolutely humane, urban environment (Photo: Lazlo Horvath)

President Aliyev receives credentials of new Belgian ambassador



Incoming Ambassador Schoofs exchanged dialogue concerning the excellent Belgian–Azerbaijani business relationship with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has received the credentials of H.E. Bert Schoofs, newly-appointed Belgian Ambassador to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkmenistan. After inspecting a guard of honour, he presented his credentials to President Aliyev. During their subsequent conversation, the President noted the successful development of bilateral Azerbaijani–Belgian relations.

Highlighting the great potential for the further strengthening of these ties in such spheres as trade, investment, and education, President Aliyev noted the importance of expanding co-operation in economic terms. Making reference to those Belgian companies already active in Azerbaijan, he also highlighted their successful activities in the construction sector.

Ambassador Schoofs recalled that he visited Azerbaijan in 2012 and was fascinated by the beauty of the country and Baku, in particular, together with the sincerity of the people. He noted that, other than in the construction sector, Belgian companies are also active in such fields as logistics, pharmaceuticals, medicine and technology. He reiterated that Belgian entrepreneurs are always ready to work with Azerbaijani companies.

Over 10,000 UAE tourists visited Azerbaijan in July

Altogether, 10,072 UAE tourists visited Azerbaijan in July, equating to a 100 per cent increase on the same period last year, according to the Azerbaijani Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The Ministry attributed this dramatic rise to intensified efforts aimed at attracting tourists, the opening of a representative office in the UAE in 2011, and the introduction of a simplified visa regime for UAE citizens in November 2015.

According to the Azerbaijani Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the number of tourists from the region visiting Azerbaijan increased 30-fold from January–June 2016. Rashid Al-Noori, Chairman, UAE Representative Office, Azerbaijani Ministry of Culture and Tourism, stated that the results were attributable to the strategic decision by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to waive the visa requirement for travellers from the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) region, together with the vision of Abulfaz Garayev, Azerbaijani Minister of Culture and Tourism. His decisions led to the opening of Atlantis Holidays, the first Azerbaijani Overseas Representative Office in the region, in late 2011.

He commented: “When that decision was made, I always knew that Azerbaijan would become a much-acclaimed tourist destination for the Arabs. We were tasked with the mission of promoting and positioning Azerbaijan as a beautiful destination for Arab nationals, residents and travel industry professionals. We assumed the task with pleasure and, with the support of the Azerbaijani government, this vision has been achieved.”

By highlighting the excellent climate and weather, culture, cuisine, nature, attractions and diversity of Azerbaijan, Atlantis Holidays reported double-digit growth across almost all of the Azerbaijani regions, including Baku, Gabala, Guba, Naftalan, Shahdag and

Ismayilli. Mr Al-Noori continued: “Prospects for August–December 2016 remain positive, with around 30,000 Arab tourists from the GCC region expected to travel to Azerbaijan in the Summer/Eid al-Adha holiday peak season.” According to the Azerbaijani Ministry of Culture and Tourism, around 10,086 people visited Azerbaijan from the UAE and 6,624 persons from the rest of the GCC region during March–April 2016.

Mr Al-Noori expanded: “Spend per tourist remains as previously estimated by the UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) at an average of \$700 (£524.2). As you can see, this equates to an increase of 4.6 per cent between January and June, which is a figure 30 times higher than the indicator for the same period last year.”

He continued: “These results show that Azerbaijan remains a priority destination for tourists from the UAE and other Gulf States. It portrays the strong desire of Arabs to travel to Azerbaijan, and this continues to drive tourism growth. Azerbaijan keeps improving and developing new tourist sites and constructing accessible infrastructure. Our strategic plan is to implement new facilities, such as the already-introduced tax-free shopping system, thereby helping tourists enjoy a simplified travel experience.”

Baku recorded the highest increase in tourism, amongst Azerbaijani regions, with the number of visitors from the GCC region increasing by 16.1 per cent. The number grew 30 times in May and the Ministry predicts that it will increase by 3.5–4.5 per cent during the course of 2016, in line with the long-term projection of an annual 4 per cent growth during the period 2010–20. Gabala, Naftalan, Shahdag, Guba, Ismayilli, Gakh and Zagatala followed the capital in the popularity rankings, respectively.

Stratfor – Azerbaijan changing the Caucasus balance

Stratfor, the leading US-based geopolitical intelligence analyst, has recognised that Azerbaijan is playing an increasingly essential role in the Caucasus balance and that, as a consequence, this is changing.

It acknowledges: “With Iran emerging from the malaise of sanctions, it is reaching north and becoming more assertive. Russia, too, is changing tack, aligning with Azerbaijan instead of Armenia in the long-running Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In early August, Azerbaijan made a bid to capitalise on these changes by hosting the presidents of Iran and Russia for a summit in Baku. The meeting featured discussions on counterterrorism initiatives and the negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh and Caspian Sea disputes. But it was regional connectivity – not conflict – that topped the agenda, specifically the North–South Transport Corridor and its railway construction component.”

According to the article, the 7200km North–South Transport Corridor was first discussed in 2008. This necessitates the construction of railway, road and shipping infrastructure from Iran to Russia through Azerbaijan.

It continues: “If realised, the North–South Transport Corridor would have a strong effect on the region’s geopolitical order. It would connect Iran with Russia’s Baltic ports, and give Russia rail connectivity to both the Persian Gulf and the Indian rail network. At least on paper, this would mean that goods could be carried from Mumbai to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas and further to Baku. They could then pass over the Russian border into Astrakhan before going on to Moscow and St Petersburg, then onward into Europe. And the project has been progressing – railway connections between Iran and Azerbaijan are under construction, even connecting into the Russian system.

“While regional heavyweights stand to accrue economic benefits from the project, the transportation corridor would be a major geopolitical asset for Azerbaijan, in particular. Much to the chagrin of Tehran and Moscow, Baku has shown a willingness to co-operate with the West. The Azerbaijani government has participated in Western projects, such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, and signalled that it wants to participate in the Trans–Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars



Following completion of the first section in 2014, the first train to use the North–South Transport Corridor arrives in the Turkmen frontier village of Ak-Yayla

(BTK) railway projects. These would connect the Caspian and the Black Seas.”

According to the article, the prominent Azerbaijani role in the North–South Transportation Corridor will also have a political implication: “The North–South Transportation Corridor would further isolate Armenia, because it will allow Iran to connect with eastern Turkey via the BTK railway. This link with the Georgian Black Sea ports would bypass Armenia entirely, partly sidelining its ambitions for greater regional connectivity, whilst enhancing Baku’s standing.”

The article explains that the Baku summit could not have come at a better time for Azerbaijan, commenting: “Relations between Russia and Armenia are tenuous, with Moscow pressurising the government in Yerevan to grant concessions in Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan’s administration is also beset by violent protests and political discontent.”

The article ends on an upbeat note: “There are also signs that Azerbaijan’s push has already paid off. Only two days before the start of the summit in Baku, Russian President Vladimir Putin received Armenian leaders in Moscow for talks on Nagorno-Karabakh. Seyran Ohanyan, Armenian Defence Minister, said that his country would not make unilateral concessions in the dispute, especially if Russia sold military equipment to Azerbaijan. Putin responded that Azerbaijan is an oil producer with gold reserves and a growing economy — and that it can buy what it pleases.” Go to <http://bit.ly/stratforus> to read the full article.

Bundestag member issues Karabakh statement

Responding to an enquiry from TEAS, Max Straubinger, Member of the German Bundestag, and the Parliamentary General Secretary of the Regional Fraction of the Christian Socialist Union (CSU), has issued a statement on the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

His statement reads: “It is clear to the CSU Regional Fraction of the Bundestag that the respect for international law and the territorial integrity of states is not to be doubted. The four outstanding resolutions passed by the UN Security Council must be followed. It is beyond doubt that the occupation of Azerbaijani territory, which is against international law, must be ended. The refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) should be able to return home. A peaceful settlement of the conflict will contribute towards the stability of the entire region.”

Mr Straubinger continued: “In the perception of the CSU Regional Fraction, Germany – the current OSCE Chair – bears the responsibility to go to any lengths to prevent any resurgence of the conflict and pursue the path leading to peace. We therefore require a consolidated ceasefire to be attained, together with confidence-

building measures and an initiation of negotiations. The German Government is also supporting the achievement of these objectives, and this was demonstrated when Frank-Walter Steinmeier, German Foreign Minister, recently travelled to the South Caucasus for political talks. When opening the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly’s annual conference in Tbilisi on 1 July, he correctly emphasised various solutions for resolving the deadlocked conflicts in the OSCE area. However, Germany is trying to gradually build minimal confidence between the parties and to ease the everyday life of the population.

“The German Foreign Minister stressed that Germany would endeavour to increase the size of the team for the Special Representative Mission of the OSCE for the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, establishing a mechanism of investigation for military incidents and stabilising the ceasefire by further measures, e.g. with enhanced monitoring. Thereafter, it will be possible to take the first steps towards serious negotiations. Furthermore, Germany strives to revive and intensify the negotiation formats and channels, such as the OSCE Minsk Group. This is not for cementing the status quo, but for achieving progress in the conflict settlement process.”

Ashiq Nargile – keeping ashik music pure, unsullied and relevant

Ashiq music originated around the 7th century, during the heroic era of the Turkic peoples, being mentioned in the ancient Azerbaijani epic *The Book of Dada Gorgud*. Ashiqs are nomadic bards or troubadours, and traditionally played an intrinsic role in the oral transmission of verses, heroic tales and news. The position of the ashik in society was particularly raised during the reign of Shah Ismayil (1487–1524), founder of the Safavid dynasty, who was a prominent poet and amateur ashik.

Ashiqs traditionally sing in a uniquely passionate style and accompany themselves on the saz, which is an eight- or ten-stringed long-necked lute. They are normally taught orally, and the music was only notated during the early 20th century. Ashiq music is performed in many ethnically Azerbaijani regions in the Caucasus, the most notable schools being those of Ganja, Kalbajar, Gazakh, Tovuz and Borchali. In some regions, a balaban player and other wind instruments, and possibly a musician playing the qaval (frame drum), accompany the ashik. In 2009, the Art of the Azerbaijani Ashiq was entered into the UNESCO List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Nargile Mehtiyeva (known as Ashiq Nargile) is one of the foremost female ashiks in the world, emanating from the ethnically Azerbaijani region of Borchali in Georgia, and her life has been dedicated to maintaining the art of the ashiks from her region. She was originally inspired during her childhood in the 1980s, when a regular programme on Azerbaijani television focused on female ashiks. This has now been revived and she makes frequent appearances. Many of the other ashiks on the programme perform against a playback accompaniment, but she eschews this, as such an approach would not be authentic.

The Borchali tradition is renowned for being very serious, with a focus on heavy, emotional songs, and this is possibly attributable to the fact that those in the region feel separate from Azerbaijan, even if they are part of the same culture. During her time in the UK, Ashiq Nargile performed at The Forge in Camden, the Brazier's Park Festival in Oxfordshire, the World of Music, Arts and Dance (WOMAD) Festival, and collaborated with musicians from Siberia and the Appalachian mountains for the BBC Radio 3 *Late Junction* show. Neil Watson caught up with her just prior to her enthusiastically-received concert at Azerbaijan House in London to find out more:

What prompted you to learn the saz and to sing ashik music?

During my childhood in Borchali, ashiks would go to weddings and houses and I would hear them in this context. Despite being fascinated by the sound – particularly of the saz – I could not gain access to the instrument. At the time, it was not easy to hear ashik music in the media, as it was never shown on Georgian television. After gaining independence, Georgia passed through a very nationalistic period, when the media was assisting with the creation of a specifically Georgian identity, making it a very difficult time for Azerbaijanis in Georgia. I often approached the ashiks I had heard to see if I could borrow a saz, but they were very possessive and never let me try their instruments.

However, my singing voice had been recognised, and I longed to perform. Sometimes I would climb the tree in my parents' garden and pretend I was on stage. I moved to Baku with my parents at the age of 14 for safety reasons, as during this period there were many attacks on Azerbaijanis in Georgia. My grandmother was already living there and was very keen for me to learn ashik music. Although there were very few female ashiks in Borchali, she had seen the programme of female ashiks on Azerbaijani



Ashiq Nargile performs before an ecstatic 1200-strong audience at the Rustaveli Theatre – the largest theatre in Tbilisi

television. Thereafter, she supported me in my quest to become an ashik and arranged lessons.

Did you learn to perform in a music academy?

I attended the Baku Musical Conservatory, where my teacher played tar and a little saz, but had no singing ability. To teach singing, he had to manipulate his throat to give the effect of singing. Thereafter, I took lessons from some ashiks of the Borchali school that were living in Baku. There are regional differences between the various types of ashik, and my grandmother was keen to ensure I embraced the correct tradition.

Saz playing is very rhythmic, and clearly the fingerwork has a high degree of complexity. What are the main challenges in playing the saz?

The first year of studying and playing the saz was extremely challenging. Plucked with a plectrum, the strings are hard, resulting in blistered and bleeding fingers. After so many years of playing, my fingers have now become very tough. I then began to focus on learning the techniques of saz playing, and this became easier over time.

The instrument will remain in tune for 15 songs or so. However, ashiks use three different tunings and change the tuning on the middle string according to the melody they are playing. To reduce retuning during the performance, I often group together songs that share the same tuning, and go through all three tunings during the concert to ensure that the performance becomes more aurally interesting for the listener. During a typical performance of an hour or so, I usually play so intensely that I constantly need to check and adjust the tuning.

Which scales are used in ashik music?

The saz is an extremely versatile instrument, and can be used to perform numerous genres of music, including mugham, Azerbaijani and western melodies. In the ashik tradition, there are 72 guideline melodies. They are unlike western music, and there are similarities with mugham modes, although they are not the same. It is possible to sing various lyrics over the different ashik melodies, using different poetry. It is a unique tradition, and cannot be understood or evaluated on the same basis as western music.

Which poems form the text of your songs?

I normally perform Borchali melodies and texts during my television

appearances, although I occasionally write the texts myself. For performances to those who are more well-versed in ashik music, I play and sing lesser-known texts, mostly from Borchali. The most important aspect is that I must really feel the poetry and this should reflect my own values and emotions.



The passionate performance by Ashiq Nargile at The Forge in Camden attracted a rapturous response

Where do ashiks generally perform their music, other than at festivals?

In addition to festivals, I regularly appear on television. I sometimes perform at weddings, although I am very selective about those. In Georgia, I appear at both Azerbaijani and Georgian festivals, although I always prefer to sing in Azerbaijani and be known as a traditional Azerbaijani ashik.

Do you ever collaborate with balaban players?

It is not the tradition to do so in Borchali, and I have never specifically collaborated with a balaban player. However, I have occasionally played with a large group that includes a balaban. I also sometimes perform with an expansive Georgian ensemble that mixes western instruments with the Azerbaijani tar and nagara drum. I am open to experimentation and collaboration, and often participate in projects that synthesise opera and mugham.



Ashiq Nargile gave an intimate unplugged performance for an appreciative group of compatriots at Azerbaijan House

Since the music for saz has been notated, several concerti have been written for saz and symphony orchestra, and I have been the soloist in numerous performances of these. Some early Azerbaijani operas were based on ashik *Dastans*, which focus on heroic deeds. For example, the *Koruglu* opera by Uzeyir Hajibeyli is based on a traditional ashik legend, where the eponymous hero is actually an ashik. Many of the stories in early Azerbaijani operas mixed mugham with western classical music, but the libretti were based on ashik tales.

How does the performance style of ashiks from Borchali differ to those from the other regional schools of ashik performance?

The style is actually very similar to that found in Tabriz (in Iranian Azerbaijan), and the Borchali style is based around the oldest form of ashik performance, which remains authentic and unaffected by other musical genres. In fact, Borchali ashik music is very much like a lullaby, albeit featuring many heavy, sad songs.

The repertoire from Borchali is particularly melodic and melancholic, containing a great deal of longing. This is partly because the poets and performers are living in Georgia, and feel nostalgia for their homeland. They are physically separated, but ashik music provides a connection with their traditions. They feel distant from their country and parted from the wider Azerbaijani community.

What are your thoughts about such mugham performers as Alim Qasimov, which incorporate elements of ashik music in their performances?

I do not disapprove of this synthesis of mugham and ashik music, as they are both replete with quasi-philosophical and spiritual thoughts and are quite compatible. There are definitely similarities between the musical genres, and shared elements in the instrumental music, together with a similar singing technique and sometimes settings of the same poetry in both forms of music.

How is your music received in Borchali and internationally?

In the past, appreciation has been restricted to the older generation, but has recently received a great surge in popularity amongst younger people who want to listen and learn. I like to think I have had some part to play in raising the popularity of the music, as I actively seek to teach young people.

I am particularly keen to teach music

students the original, authentic ashik music from Borchali, despite the current tendency towards combining it with some



A beautiful noise: Ashiq Nargile collaborates with some of her fellow ashiks in the ethnically Azerbaijani region of Borchali in Georgia

popular music. I have been teaching for many years, but recently the Akhundov Museum opened in Tbilisi, and I have been giving tuition both there and at pupils' homes.

This is your third visit to the UK. How is your career developing, and do you have plans to record further albums?

Currently, I am unable to say exactly what is going to happen. I am on a creative journey, yet my destination remains unknown. I am the mother of two children, and the development of my life and career has not been planned. I perform where I am asked, and am glad for any opportunity to propagate my art.

My path is full of little stars and moons, and I capture these for transformation into positive contributions to my career that will also propagate the art of the ashik to a new audience through performance, television broadcasts and recordings. One thing is clear – I want to remain true to my music in its purest, most unadulterated form.



Ashiq Nargile performs with some of her fellow female ashiks for a popular programme on Azerbaijani television

Visit <http://bit.ly/terlanbalam> to hear a glorious, evocative, passionate performance of *Terlan Balam* by Ashiq Nargile at the 2016 WOMAD Festival.

Melodies in the Caucasus foothills by Alastair Maclachlan

The Eighth Gabala International Music Festival, which ran from 30 July–5 August, finished in spectacular fashion, attracting cheers and a standing ovation. This followed a superb concert by the Kiev Virtuosi under the baton of esteemed cellist and conductor Dmitry Yablonsky that featured a series of exquisite pieces, some of which showcased the world-class voice of Azerbaijani baritone Javid Samadov, his compatriot tenor Azer Rzazade and Italian soprano Federica Lombardi. This constituted a breathtaking finale to a superb week of music.

This seven-day festival was organised in the picturesque city of Qabala (Gabala), located at the new Heydar Aliyev Congress Centre in the beautiful valley facing Durja and the Tufandag Ski Resort. The setting was dominated by the majestic Caucasus Mountains rising in the background, creating a unique atmosphere for this event.

Farhad Badalbeyli and Dmitry Yablonsky, Artistic Directors, Gabala International Music Festival, designed and delivered this remarkable event, skilfully blending together the sounds and talents of musicians and artistes from Azerbaijan and the wider international world of music and dance. Supported by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation and Gilan Holding, this was the most successful festival so far.

Fact Box

- The Gabala International Music festival is usually held at the end of July.
- Gabala is well-served by a range of superb four and five star hotels with plenty of leisure facilities.
- Gabala International Airport is a mere 30 minutes' drive.
- Every concert is free.

Visit www.qabalamusicfestival.com for festival details and www.azerbaijan.travel.com for tourist information.



Dmitry Yablonsky (cello) and Farhad Badalbeyli (piano), Artistic Directors, Gabala International Music Festival, perform before an appreciative audience (Photos: Alastair Maclachlan)



The night of passionate, exquisite, finely-crafted mugham always ranks amongst the most popular performances

Musicians from around the world came together to participate in this festival, including those from Austria, Israel, Russia, Spain, Cuba, Ukraine and Italy, alongside the cream of Azerbaijani talent. This was a truly international and cross-cultural event, organised as part of the Azerbaijani Year of Multiculturalism.

Each day saw concerts organised in the late afternoon and evening, both inside the Congress Centre and outside on the open stage. The music ranged from Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms and Chopin, to the rhythms and dances of Flamenco and Cuban Latin, through to superb new arrangements of works by the outstanding Azerbaijani composer Gara Garayev. In a rare appearance, H.E. Polad Bulbuloghlu, Azerbaijani Ambassador to Russia and a renowned composer and singer, performed popular and classical music, accompanied by the Azerbaijani State Symphonic Orchestra under the baton of young conductor Murtuza Bulbul. The most popular evening was dedicated to a very special concert of Azerbaijani mugham, featuring the sounds of the Azerbaijani national instruments – the kamancha, tar and oud. The evocative voices filled the mountains with stories of love, and manifested the history of this amazing Azerbaijani culture. Azerbaijan and Gabala, in particular, look forward to next year when they will greet more guests from around the world to share in this magical world of music and majesty.

Legendary composer Ogtay Zulfugarov passes away

The legendary composer Ogtay Zulfugarov passed away during the early hours of 31 August, according to Firangiz Alizade, Chair, Azerbaijani Composers' Union. He was buried in the Second Alley of Honour.

Born on 31 May 1929, Mr Zulfugarov (uncle of Paris-based pianist Saida Zulfugarova) was best-known as a children's composer, although he also wrote chamber and symphonic works, including his *Piano Trio dedicated to Dmitry Shostakovich* and *Holiday Overture*. In 1972, he was received the accolade of Honoured Art Worker of Azerbaijan SSR, was appointed as a People's Artist of the Azerbaijani Republic in 2000, and received the Shohrat Order (Order of Glory) in 2009.

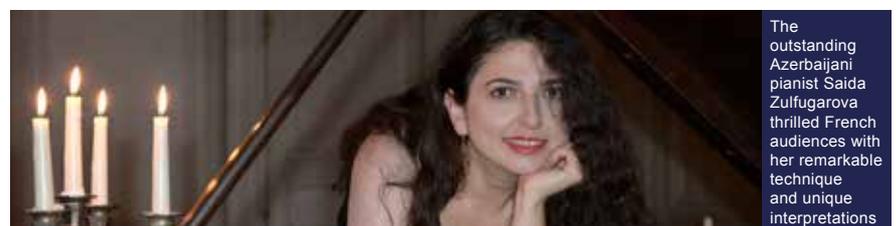


A youthful Ogtay Zulfugarov stands alongside Dmitry Shostakovich, one of the most famous Soviet 20th century composers

Zulfugarova headlines at two French festivals

The renowned Azerbaijani pianist Saida Zulfugarova has headlined at festivals in two of the most picturesque regions of France. The first of these, at the *Vent d'Est* (Eastern Wind) Festival, sponsored by the Malenitsa Foundation, took place at the La Rosière ski resort in the mountainous Savoie region of South-East France. Entitled *Sérénade aux étoiles* (Serenade of the Stars), Saida performed as the day came to an end, her carefully-selected programme comprising works by the Azerbaijani composers Gara Garayev and Farhad Badalbeyli, alongside those by Dmitry Shostakovich, Sergei Prokofiev, Franz Liszt, Frédéric Chopin and Claude Debussy.

The other took place as part of the inaugural *La Nuit Magique Château Ferté-Saint-Aubin*, located in the grounds of a magnificent 16th century Loire Valley château situated 22km south of Orléans. Saida played an atmospheric array of works by Chopin, Liszt and Debussy, together with a selection of themes from the *Nutcracker Ballet* by Tchaikovsky. Following this, attendees enjoyed honey madeleines by candlelight in the historic kitchens, attended an art exhibition of works by Sergei and Olga Kamu, saw a play improvised around one of the artworks and witnessed a firework display. Visit the Facebook fan page for Saida Zulfugarova at <http://bit.ly/saidafanpage> for photos and videos from these festivals and information on her forthcoming concerts.



The outstanding Azerbaijani pianist Saida Zulfugarova thrilled French audiences with her remarkable technique and unique interpretations

Jazzing up Azerbaijan – French magazine publishes article

The French bilingual online and iPad magazine *Couleurs Jazz* has published an article by Neil Watson, Editor and Press Officer, TEAS, on the history, development, and future of Azerbaijani jazz, in addition to discussing some of the renowned jazz performers in the country. *Couleurs Jazz* is published quarterly and has around 30,000 subscribers in over 60 countries.

Entitled *Jazz – a mellifluous Azerbaijani export*, the article comments: “Azerbaijani jazz has a long history that dates back 90 years, almost to the earliest days of recorded jazz. The first band in the country was the Eastern Jazz Band, which featured vocals by the operatic tenor Huseynghulu Sarabski (great-grandfather of Isfar Sarabski, a leading contemporary jazz pianist) who toured the Soviet Union.

“In Soviet times, attitudes towards jazz across the USSR varied according to the prevailing political climate. Obviously, the music had evolved in the US, but it was a product of the underprivileged and oppressed in the American ‘melting pot’. It was therefore sometimes difficult for jazz musicians to perform openly. Despite this, Azerbaijani composers and musicians such as Niyazi and Tofiq Guliyev managed to combine chord sequences derived from jazz into symphonic music. Attitudes changed after Stalin’s death in 1953, and were relaxed a little when Leonid Brezhnev – a lifelong jazz fan – became the Soviet premiere.

“The national music of Azerbaijan is mugham, and although its harmonic structure, metre, scales, and instrumentation differ vastly from western music, there are some commonalities with jazz, in that there are specific ensemble passages at the beginning and end of each piece, and between those there is room for improvisation around the chords and melodies. This high level of improvisation and personal interpretation made Baku very receptive to jazz music, and in the 1940s and 50s jazz musicians from across the Soviet and Eastern bloc flocked to Baku, which became known as the *Jazz Capital of the Soviet Union*, where such musicians as Parviz Rustambeyov (the Soviet Benny Goodman) could develop



Isfar Sarabski is one of the brightest Azerbaijani stars shining on the international jazz scene

their art, although the latter met his death at the hands of the KGB.

“The development of postbop modal jazz in the US in the 1950s and 60s by such luminaries as Miles Davis, Bill Evans and Ahmad Jamal paved the way for a very Azerbaijani musical revolution. Taking Azerbaijani mugham as a point of departure, classically-trained pianists and composers such as Rafiq Babayev and Vagif Mustafazadeh synthesised this with modal jazz to create a form of ethnojazz known as jazz-mugham. Often performed in the standard jazz trio format of piano, bass and drums, the work of Vagif Mustafazadeh received particular plaudits, not least for his richly ornamented approach to the piano. Often said to be ‘the Father of Azerbaijani Jazz’, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie said he had created “the music of the future” and blues guitarist BB King commented: “People call me the King of the Blues, but if I could play the piano like you do, I would call myself God.”

The article goes on to comment on the work of such contemporary musicians as Aziza Mustafazadeh (daughter of Vagif),

Emil Afrasiyab, Shahin Novrasli, Amina Figarova, and Elchin Shirinov (see pp.10–12). It continues: “Baku hosted its first jazz festival in 1969, and now the annual Baku International Jazz Festival, organised by saxophonist Rain Sultanov, attracts some of the world’s greatest talents, including Billy Cobham, the late Joe Zawinul, Charles Lloyd and Stanley Clarke, alongside the brightest talents from Azerbaijan and the post-Soviet world. Naturally, such collaborations have had an impact on Azerbaijani jazz, and the work of Isfar Sarabski and Elchin Shirinov, for example, is replete with funky repeated figures, whereas Salman Gambarov’s work firmly falls into the category of jazz-rock fusion. Tenor saxophonist Rain Sultanov takes a different approach, combining the fusion of Michael Brecker with classical, mugham and world music instrumentation and harmonies.”

It concludes: “With high-calibre musicians aplenty, jazz is very much alive, well and prospering in Azerbaijan.” Go to <http://bit.ly/azerbaijanijazz> to read the article, which is illustrated with video and sound clips of some of the foremost exponents of the music.

Amina Figarova and Denise Jannah remember Ella

New York-based jazz pianist Amina Figarova has temporarily dispensed with her standard band to team up with Dutch jazz singer Denise Jannah – the first Dutch vocalist to be signed by the legendary Blue Note label. Denise first met Amina during her more than a decade spent in Rotterdam, when she was the pianist in the quartet led by the

singer. The programme – performed across the New York area – comprises standards from the Great American Songbook that are associated with Ella Fitzgerald, the ‘First Lady of Song’, who would have celebrated her centenary next year.

In September, Amina will also team up

with the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra to perform some of her symphonic compositions, and with Israeli–British multi-instrumentalist Gilad Atzmon before resuming her European touring schedule with a date in Poland on 12 November. Visit www.aminafigarova.com for more information.



Elchin Shirinov – brewing up a storm

Seamlessly blending pianistic pyrotechnics and mugham into an intoxicating aural ethnojazz experience, Elchin Shirinov is one of the brightest lights of Azerbaijani music. Emanating from a folk music background, he first came to prominence in 2008, when he began performing at the Baku Jazz Centre, and toured Germany, France and Switzerland with the Seveda Alekperzade Band. He also played in the Rain Sultanov Quartet at festivals in Georgia and Malaysia, in addition to his homeland. From 2010–13, the Elchin Shirinov Trio became a mainstay of the Baku International Jazz Festival, and in 2010 and 2013 they appeared at the Voicingers Jazz Festival in Poland, both of which provided many opportunities for collaborations with western musicians. Later in 2013, he went on to perform at the Montreux Jazz Festival and made his inaugural Parisian appearance at the Jazzy Colours Festival.

Since that time, Elchin has become well-known on the international festival scene, appearing in Vienna, Spain, Greece, Ukraine and Hungary, in addition to Paris, and headlined at the *De Soie et de Feu (Of Silk and Fire)* festival in Mulhouse, which was dedicated to the music of Azerbaijan.

Elchin has been particularly industrious this year, and TEAS sponsored his

appearance at the Sunnyside Jazz Festival in Reims; Festival Jazz à Saint-Germain-des-Prés Paris; and in London at the Spice of Life and Vortex Jazz Clubs, in addition to his performances in Budapest and Bremen. Neil Watson caught up with Elchin alongside American drummer Eric Harland backstage at the Maison des Cultures du Monde, following their rapturously received Parisian concert where they collaborated with bassist Linley Marthe.

How do you feel after tonight's concert?

Elchin Shirinov (ES): I feel as happy as a kid. On the stage, we felt very comfortable, as there was a sound system. However, in Reims we had no amplification or mixing desk.

Eric Harland (EH): As our performance in Reims was acoustic, I had to restrain myself as a drummer, as there was no balancing and a risk I would drown out the other musicians. When there are microphones, I can open up and achieve more of a dynamic range. It is possible to range from playing extremely soft, but also very loudly, as I know that the sound mixer will ensure that the other instruments – or my drums – will remain audible.

The Maison des Cultures du Monde is an excellent stage, as this is an intimate space and the audience is right there with you.

Stages are usually a little deeper and we are consequently further back. I could feel the warmth of the audience this evening. It is always a pleasure to come to France, as I am aware of the extent of the appreciation for jazz. Audiences allow the music to touch them, and they respond more dramatically here than in the US and other countries. Other cultures respond, but sometimes this response is more analytical, and they feel they have to be more polite. It is a beautiful moment for musicians, such as ourselves, when we are aware that the level of concentration is enhanced. This is all energy, and is consequently reflected in our performances.

Were you originally classically-trained?

ES: In fact, I originate from a folk music background, although I eventually took lessons from classical teachers. My older brothers are folk musicians – one plays balaban, and the other plays tar. They were studying at Baku State Conservatoire and received some special piano lessons at the music school. This led my father to purchase a piano, and I quickly developed a love for this instrument. I performed the folk tunes practised by my brothers on the piano.

What inspired you to begin playing jazz?

ES: One of my brothers bought me a cassette with Oscar Peterson on one side,

Elchin performs alongside bassist Linley Marthe (formerly with Joe Zawinul) and drummer Eric Harland (formerly with Charles Lloyd) at the renowned Festival Jazz à Saint-Germain-des-Prés Paris



and Bill Evans on the reverse. I adored this music and played the cassette each day. I was most impressed by the formidable technique of Oscar Peterson, but it was the introspective approach of Bill Evans that really captured my imagination. I liked his harmonies and his cerebral approach.

EH: The first drummer that really influenced me was Elvin Jones. He was featured on the first album that I bought, which was John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* from 1965. I was so greatly entranced with the work of Coltrane that I became very much aware of the playing of Elvin Jones and wondered what that sound was. I started to look into the nature of the support element in jazz, behind the soloist. Before that, I heard everything together, but I was interested in finding out how the performances of Coltrane, pianist McCoy Tyner and drummer Elvin Jones worked together. I always wanted my playing to sound like the entire group.

I remember listening to that record and trying to play with each group member, and wanted to become used to their phrasing. For example, I would hear how Coltrane would move around over the chords and try to mimic him. The next time I heard the record, I would just listen to Coltrane and focus on Elvin and learned how to play with the space between the chords. I wanted to see how the instruments worked separately, but also in unison.

I specialise in polyrhythmic drumming, where there are multiple rhythms working simultaneously, and that was how Max Roach, Elvin Jones and the other great drummers played in all jazz from bebop and beyond. Elvin Jones was virtually the first drummer to support other instrumentalists – that was part of his sound. The way he moved the soloists along and felt the beat differed to other drummers of the 1950s and 60s. Each drummer has different beat places, and that determines where they feel the pulse. Alignment of time is one thing, but pulse is rather different. All drummers have a different level of pulse and that brings the group together.

How did you start playing the melodica (wind-operated piano)?

ES: I have been using this instrument for the first time here in France. I liked its sound, and thought I would experiment with this instrument.

To what extent did Vagif Mustafazadeh, the father of jazz-mugham, have an influence on you?

ES: I do not like to call my music 'jazz-mugham,' as such a style does not exist. In my view, it should be called ethnojazz – jazz inspired by folk music, as this is the source of many of the harmonies. The mother of Vagif Mustafazadeh was a folk music teacher, and she taught him mugham from his childhood. He then started to combine folk and jazz music. He

was not the first person to do so, but he was one of the best, and was consequently recorded. Naturally, I listened to his work a lot, but I have also performed much of the jazz standard repertoire.

Azerbaijani folk music is replete with microtones. What are the challenges when combining jazz and folk music?

ES: I only started to perform ethnojazz around five years ago, and have been mixing folk music with jazz harmonies and different rhythmical metres. This evening I performed some folksongs, compositions taken from the Azerbaijani classical repertoire, and some of my own compositions. I often change the metre, chords and style, and like to experiment and mix up the music. This is particularly the case when I improvise around themes from Azerbaijani classical music, including the *Waltz* from the *Seven Beauties* ballet by Gara Garayev and an aria from the operetta *O Olmasin Bu Olsun (If Not That One, Then This One)* by Uzeyir Hajibeyli.

Does performing Azerbaijani ethnojazz present western musicians with any particular challenges?

EH: It's very interesting for me, particularly as a drummer. I was fortunate to play a lot with tabla drummer Zakir Hussain, who introduced me to the really deep complexities of eastern rhythms. His work is amazing, and I had the opportunity to visit India numerous times where he would

teach me the ragas, which have some underlying similarities with Azerbaijani folk music. The way his music moves now feels very natural to me.

I know that, when I was younger, and solely playing music from the US, I would have found it very hard to play such rhythms, which give more scope for unusual drumming patterns. In the beginning, that can be hard, as eastern rhythms serve to create a different musical syntax. I had not listened to Azerbaijani music to any great extent before starting my collaboration with Elchin, and only visited Azerbaijan for the first time last year with saxophonist Charles Lloyd, when he performed at the Baku International Jazz Festival. Baku is a great blend of cultures, in addition to its indigenous culture, and that really surprised me. It's impossible to imagine what it is like before you visit.

How was it like to work with Rain Sultanov as part of his quartet?

ES: He's an excellent saxophonist and I have played with him a great deal. He was much influenced by Michael Brecker and Jan Garbarek, and now performs in a very transcendental style.

Pianist Brad Mehldau has made some appreciative comments about your music. How is your music received by the jazz community and by audiences around the world?

ES: Audiences in Poland, the UK and France respond particularly well to my music. I have many friends in London, and collaborate a great deal with them. My inaugural recording was made with the members of my British trio – Andrea Di Biase (bass) and Dave Hamblett (drums). I am currently searching for a record label that can record and distribute my work, maybe with the addition of a saxophonist.

How important is the Baku International Jazz Festival for Azerbaijani jazz musicians in putting them on the jazz map and enabling them to hear and work with western musicians?

ES: The Festival provides an invaluable opportunity for international collaborations. For example, I played with drummer Jeff Ballard two years ago, which was a wonderful experience.

What do you think can be done to increase awareness, understanding and appreciation of the jazz scene in Azerbaijan?

ES: Unfortunately, there is a lack of ordinary studios in Azerbaijan, and none even contain a piano. It is necessary to visit Poland or London to record. Our first album was recorded in a good studio in London with a piano. Well-equipped studios in Azerbaijan are an absolute necessity, as only then can recordings of the requisite quality for western audiences be made.

EH: Imagination is beautiful, but seems to only benefit those that think outside the box. At the moment, as people around the world are so unsettled and suspicious, everyone is used to just thinking about being inside their box and not using their imagination. The market – including that for music – is geared towards catering towards this. Hopefully, audiences will come through this period of suspicion and want to be free again. They need to move away from only seeking music that is familiar, and from dismissing any music that comes from a broadly Islamic background.

How did the members of the trio meet?

ES: I met Linley two years ago at the Baku International Jazz Festival. Then I saw Linley and Eric work together on YouTube and recognised that they achieved some amazing grooves with wonderful energy. Eric and I met again last year when he came to Baku with the legendary Charles Lloyd.

18 November

Elchin Shirinov Trio (part of the *London Jazz Festival*)

Pizza Express Jazz Club, 10 Dean Street,

London, W1D 3RW

20.30hrs

Call +44 (0)20 74394962

Go to www.elchinshirinov.com to learn more about Elchin Shirinov and to experience his aural soundscape.



Elchin's performances combine supreme artistry and mastery of folk idioms and classical themes to remarkable effect (Photo: Jean-Christophe Hanché)

Armenia fails to respond to ICRC overtures on hostages

Ali Hasanov, Deputy Prime Minister and Chairman of the Azerbaijani Republican Commission for International Humanitarian Assistance, received Elena Ajmone Sessera, Head, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Baku on 3 August. Dialogue focused on the ongoing humanitarian crisis caused by the expulsion of an estimated 875,000 Azerbaijani internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees from their homeland, due to the illegal occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and the seven surrounding districts.

During the meeting, Mr Hasanov stressed the appreciation of his country for the humanitarian work undertaken by the ICRC in alleviating some of the distress caused by the occupation. He emphasised that Azerbaijan has fostered an environment that enables such international organisations as the ICRC to operate in a

free and transparent manner. Mrs Sessera replied that 2016 had been particularly challenging during and in the aftermath of the 'Four-Day War' that saw artillery used on and around the 'contact line' between Azerbaijan and the Armenian-occupied territories.

Both parties then focused on the plight of Dilham Asgarov (aged 56) and Shahbaz Guliyev (aged 48 years). These two Azerbaijanis were taken prisoner by Armenian forces in June 2014 when visiting their relatives' graves in the occupied Kelbajar region, near Nagorno-Karabakh. A third man – Hasan Hasanov (aged 38) – was shot dead. In December 2014, an unrecognised court sentenced Dilham to life imprisonment and Shahbaz to 22 years in jail.

Mr Hasanov recalled that, during a

meeting in Geneva with Peter Maurer, President, ICRC, he had requested ICRC humanitarian assistance in enabling the hostages to maintain contact with their families via web-based communication. He reiterated his request to Mrs Sessera to place pressure on the Armenian occupying regime to facilitate this.

Lionel Zetter, Director, TEAS, commented: "It is very disappointing that the ICRC has been unable to secure the release of these two men, nor even facilitate ongoing communication with their families.

"It is quite obvious that they are civilians, and that they were engaged in no more sinister actions than tending the graves of their relatives. Their continued detention is a black mark against the Armenian government, and a sign of how desperate they are to secure any kind of leverage."

Reshaped 'contact line' defences to be reinforced

There will be strengthening of the defences around the 'contact line', protected by the Azerbaijani Armed Forces, in the areas liberated from Armenian occupation in April. The comments came on 30 August following a board meeting hosted by the Azerbaijani Defence Ministry, dedicated to the analysis of combat training.

During the night of 2 April, all Azerbaijani positions along the 'contact line' were subjected to heavy fire from the Armenian side, which used large-calibre weapons, mortars and rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers. The armed clashes resulted in myriad deaths and injuries amongst the Azerbaijani military and population. Azerbaijan responded with a counterattack, which

led to liberation of several strategic heights and settlements.

At the meeting, deputy defence ministers and Azerbaijani military commanders presented reports on their state of combat readiness, discipline and other topics.

Zakir Hasanov, Azerbaijani Defence Minister, provided officials with information on equipping military units with advanced weaponry, ammunition and armed vehicles, together with improving the combat-readiness of personnel, strengthening their psychological condition and discipline, and enhancing their social conditions.

Bundestag MP Strenz remonstrates against occupation

Members of the Azerbaijani–German Working Group on Interparliamentary Relations met Karin Strenz MP, Chair, South Caucasus Parliamentary Friendship Group in the German Bundestag. During the meeting, Rovshan Rzayev, Head, Azerbaijani–German Working Group on Interparliamentary Relations, stressed the importance of mutual visits aimed at developing bilateral relations. He

expressed his belief that Germany, as the current OSCE chair, would seek to resolve the ongoing Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Mrs Strenz stressed that the Bundestag remains resolutely supportive of the Azerbaijani position on Nagorno-Karabakh, including the implementation of the four outstanding resolutions of the

UN Security Council that condemn the Armenian occupation. She also recalled her impressions from the meeting with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Berlin in June 2016, during which he met German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and his speech at the Azerbaijani–German Business Forum. Mrs Strenz noted the importance of expanding bilateral co-operation in the political, economic, and other spheres.

No religious grounds for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

Writing in a letter addressed to the Azerbaijani Embassy in Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church has formally pledged to support the peaceful settlement of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, stressing the need to apply mutually acceptable solutions within a legal framework. The comments came in the wake of the final declaration of the 23rd annual conference of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy. The final declaration included

an anti-Azerbaijani sentiment that led the Azerbaijani Embassy to seek clarification from the Church.

The letter recalls that, since 1993, with the mediation of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Russia, numerous meetings have taken place between Armenian and Azerbaijani religious leaders. During these, all participants have repeatedly reiterated in unequivocal terms that the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-

Karabakh conflict is purely territorial and devoid of any religious grounding. It stresses that incitement towards ethnic hatred is a sin from both the Christian and Islamic perspectives.

Patriarch Kirill reiterated his support for achieving a peaceful and fair solution to the conflict, and stressed that Azerbaijani concerns would be brought to the attention of the leadership of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy.

3bn barrels of ACG oil

On 16 August, BP calculated that 3bn barrels of oil have now been extracted from the Azeri–Chirag–Guneshli (ACG) field since production from the Chirag platform was inaugurated in 1997. Gordon Birrell, Regional President: Azerbaijan–Georgia–Turkey (AGT), BP, explained: “This is a significant milestone for both BP and for Azerbaijan, and I would like to thank all individuals and teams involved, and everyone who made this day happen.”

Altogether, the ACG complex comprises six production platforms: Chirag-1, Central Azeri, West Azeri, East Azeri, Deepwater Guneshli, West Chirag; and two process, gas compression, water injection and utilities (PCWU) platforms, equipped with the latest technologies. Elkhan Mamedov, Production Vice-President (VP), AGT, BP, reminisced, saying: “I recall my time as an instrument technician, cracking a valve on the first oil inauguration ceremony on the Central Azeri platform around a decade ago! It is a huge privilege for me to witness the 3bn-barrel milestone in my current capacity as Production VP. This was a truly remarkable achievement and attributable to the efforts of all people involved. This is certainly not the end, and more exciting milestones are yet to come!”

The final development was the Chirag Oil Project, which was sanctioned in 2010. As part of this phase, the West Chirag platform was installed between the existing Chirag and Deepwater Guneshli platforms. First oil from the platform was extracted on 28 January 2014.

Greg Riley, Exploration Vice-President, BP, remarked: “This was a remarkable achievement, and it is an excellent reminder of all those colleagues who worked so hard and smart to contribute to this outstanding result. They took the project from the agreement signing, through the appraisal and development stages, and then into production. I think it is especially rewarding that this occurred at a time of such sustained high performance. Congratulations to all those who worked so hard to get us to this momentous milestone, and also those who are playing a part in sustaining safe, reliable production.”

Azerbaijan requests \$2bn in WTO agricultural aid

Mahmud Mammadgulyev, Azerbaijani Deputy Foreign Minister, has revealed that the Azerbaijani government is set to request \$2bn (£1.5bn) in aid from the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to support its currently underdeveloped agricultural sector.

Speaking to the RIA Novosti agency, he commented: “We have asked the WTO for \$1bn (£753.8m) in direct aid to support the agricultural industry, together with an additional \$1bn to undertake an agricultural recovery project in the currently Armenian-occupied



Baroness Nicholson will outline the current opportunities for British business in the Azerbaijani economy

Briefing from Baroness Nicholson

British Expertise/CATBIG have organised a briefing by Baroness Nicholson, Prime Ministerial Trade Envoy to Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Iraq, on 12 October at 1600hrs in Committee Room G of the House of Lords. The briefing comes in the wake of similar meetings organised with Charles Hendry, her predecessor, and her own visit to the Caspian Oil and Gas Exhibition in Baku. The cost of attending the briefing is £50 for non-members of British Expertise and CATBIG. Go to <http://bit.ly/baronessnicholson> to book tickets.

SOCAR to sink 11 wells by year-end

The Azneft Production Association of the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijani Republic (SOCAR) has announced plans to sink 11 new wells by the end of 2016. According to its website, SOCAR will sink seven wells in the shallow-water part of the Guneshli field and four wells at the Chilov field, which are being developed by the 28 May Oil and Gas Production Unit. The statement read: “Three inactive wells were returned to operation at the fields developed by the 28 May Oil and Gas Production Unit, six facilities were established and commissioned, and 17 facilities are still under construction.”

Over the past five years, the well stock on the Oil Rocks Oil and Gas Production Unit has been updated by a third. The unit has commissioned nine new wells since early 2016. The Narimanov Oil and Gas Production Unit has established five new facilities during the year, and another seven will be commissioned by the year-end, according to the SOCAR message.

Ivana Duarte to head EBRD Baku

Ivana Duarte has been appointed as the new Head of the Baku office for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). An experienced economist, she joined the EBRD in April 2004, where her previous position was as Senior Banker within the Transport Team, overseeing activity in Central Europe, Turkey, Jordan and Morocco.

In this role, Ms Duarte led several complex transportation projects in various countries, including Albania, Kazakhstan, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Russia, Turkey, Morocco and Tajikistan. She replaces Neil McKain, who has been appointed as EBRD director for Central Asia. To date, the EBRD has allocated €2.5bn (£2.1bn) to facilitate 162 projects in Azerbaijan.

Over 70 state facilities destined for privatisation

The Azerbaijani State Committee for Property Affairs has revealed that 71 state facilities are destined for privatisation in Azerbaijan. Of these, 31 are joint stock companies operating in various economic sectors, two are business parks, 10 are means of transport, and 28 are other state properties and facilities. The total value of shares in the enterprises put on sale – with a 50 per cent discount – exceeds AZN2.4m (£1.1m).

territories of Nagorno-Karabakh and the seven surrounding regions, following their liberation.”

To date, Azerbaijan has received €7.2m (£6.1m) in direct aid from the EU to help develop and overhaul the agricultural industry in the Azerbaijani regions. It plans to improve sanitation in this area and upgrade the quality of agricultural products. The total 2016 Azerbaijani budget for agricultural and regional development amounts to \$15.5m (£11.6m).

Massive taxation reforms underway

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has ratified a series of extensive tax reforms, aimed at making Azerbaijani tax legislation commensurate with international taxation law and fostering an attractive business climate for overseas investors. These reforms will make it possible to apply more favourable value-added taxation (VAT) rates for socially vulnerable groups, reducing the taxation burden on small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and resolving the taxation problems of trade operations.

Ilkin Valiyev, Azerbaijani Deputy Taxation Minister, explained that the move was justified by the objective of amending Azerbaijani legislation to simplify tax administration. He continued: "One of our main goals is to reduce the taxation burden, which currently stands at 39.8 per cent. This figure is less than in other member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), but slightly higher than in other countries of the region. Thus, we plan to optimise and lighten the tax burden."

Educational concepts come to Azerbaijan



The tenth Azerbaijan International Education Exhibition, the only event of its kind in the country, supported by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Education, will run from 7–9 October at the Baku Expo Centre. This exhibition has hitherto been held alongside the Azerbaijan careers exhibition. The organiser is Caspian Event Organisers (CEO).

This year, representatives of universities, colleges and other educational institutions from Belarus, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and other countries – in addition to Azerbaijan – will inform delegates of their educational programmes. The national stands of Poland (Go Poland) and Lithuania (Study in Lithuania) will provide information on potential opportunities for the education of Azerbaijani students abroad. Local exhibitors include the Azerbaijan State University of Oil and Industry, Azerbaijan Technical University, Azerbaijan University of Technology (Ganja), Ganja State University, Azerbaijan State Agrarian University (Ganja), the Azerbaijan Architecture and Construction University, CELT Colleges and, for the first time, the SABIS SUN International School, which prepares children for international education. The

Building the future

BakuBuild 2016 – the largest construction event in the Caspian region – will take place from 19–22 October, marking the start of Caspian Construction Week. Attended by 413 exhibitors from 25 countries, the exhibition will include national groups from the Czech Republic, Germany, India, Italy, Iran, Spain and the UAE, and be attended by 11,562 visitors from 41 countries.

The Azerbaijani Ministry of Economy and Industry, Azerbaijani State Committee for Town Planning and Architecture, the Azerbaijani National Confederation of Entrepreneurs (ASK), and the Azerbaijan Export and Investment Promotion Foundation (AZPROMO) will support BakuBuild 2016. The organisers of the

exhibition are Iteca Caspian and its partner ITE Group.

This year, the exhibition, which will include more than 400 companies from 20 countries and several national stands, will occupy all pavilions at the Baku Expo Centre. The exhibition sponsors are Corella (NB Group) and Akkord Cement.

The 2016 exhibition will showcase the full range of building materials and construction machinery, including ceramics; finishing stones; marble, paints and coatings; windows and doors; interiors, roofing and flooring materials; street lighting, landscaping; park development; and metal and bronze works. One new element will be the participation of furniture companies,

Currently, Azerbaijan applies a single VAT rate of 18 per cent and the income tax rate is 20 per cent. Small businesses are classified as having up to 25 employees and an annual turnover of up to AZN200,000 (£90,349), whereas medium-sized businesses are the those with 25–125 employees and an annual turnover of AZN200,000m.

Other reforms include application of the Tax-Free system at other border checkpoints, in addition to airports; the promotion of cashless payments and gradual restriction of cash payments; preparation of a mechanism for the application of Common Reporting Standards; the introduction of rules for e-commerce taxation; and the implementation of the necessary legislative improvements to obtain and maintain indicators of transparency and exchange of taxation information, as specified by the OECD Global Forum. Details of all provisions will be found at <http://bit.ly/deloittetaxreform>, where they have been published by Deloitte Azerbaijan (a TEAS member company).

Azerbaijani Ministry of Education – which always participates in the exhibition – will also provide information on its future plans, programmes and objectives.

During the exhibition, visitors will be presented with information on Bachelor's, Masters and Postgraduate programmes, including secondary higher education and MBA courses, business foreign language courses, internships and training sessions. This year, preschool education will be represented for the first time, and exhibition visitors will be able to speak to representatives from leading higher education institutions directly regarding the application process, price of education, ranking of institutions and other details.

The Modern Equipment for Educational Institutions and Multimedia Systems section will showcase the developments of such companies as Lukas-Nuelle and Eduguide. They produce and supply laboratory equipment, interactive whiteboards, and computers for secondary and higher education institutions.

The Entry to Education exhibition will be open for students from the ninth to 11th grades, together with their parents, principals, university rectors, and vice-principals. Go to www.eduexpo.az/2016/ to register.

focusing on luxury items.

BakuBuild 2016 will provide an invaluable opportunity to obtain first-hand information and to communicate with partners and new contacts. Visit www.bakubuild.az for more information and to book an e-ticket.



BakuBuild is an essential event for all those involved or interested in benefiting from the Caspian construction boom

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