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President of Azerbaijan Sets Stage for Health Care Reforms and Compulsory Medical Insurance

President Ilham Aliyev signed an order on Jan. 10 that paves the way for health care finance reforms and the establishment of compulsory medical insurance. The order states that high-quality medical care in the country is impossible without such reforms.

The order is the first step toward improving health care management, raising the quality of medical services and introducing compulsory medical insurance.

The Cabinet of Ministers will now be tasked with preparing a 2008-2012 implementation plan within one month. The order comes into force from the day of signing.

Heydar Aliyev Foundation President Meets U.S. Congress Sub-Committee Chairman

The president of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, Azerbaijan's First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva, met on Jan. 9 with Congressman Robert Wexler, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Europe within the House Foreign Affairs Committee of the U.S. Congress.

Congressman Wexler, who was visiting Baku for the first time, said the US Congress pays particular attention to the South Caucasus region. He noted Azerbaijan's rapid development and its tolerance for different religious beliefs as an example to other countries.

The First Lady also noted the successful development of relations between Azerbaijan and the U.S. in all fields. She spoke of the importance of projects now being realized with the support of the United States, and noted the need to increase these efforts to deepen bilateral relations. In addition, she also highlighted Azerbaijan's commitment to religious tolerance.

Another topic in the meeting was the question on solving the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the possibility of eliminating Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act.

The First Lady also serves as a Member of Parliament, the UNESCO and ISESCO Goodwill Ambassador, and head of the working group on Azerbaijan-US Inter-Parliamentary Relations Standing Committee.

President Ilham Aliyev: Azerbaijan-US Relations Developing Successfully

Receiving the US delegation led by Congressman Robert Wexler, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Europe within the House Foreign Affairs Committee on January 9, President Ilham Aliyev said Azerbaijan-US relations are developing successfully.

President Aliyev also said he believed Congressman Wexler's visit was a good opportunity to witness firsthand the country's development and that it will contribute to the enhancement of bilateral ties.

Congressman Wexler in turn said the United States and Azerbaijan are close strategic partners: "Our countries are rapidly developing relations in all fields," he said.

President of Azerbaijan Receives U.S. Congressional Delegation

President Ilham Aliyev received a delegation headed by Bill Schuster, co-chair of the working group on Azerbaijan within the US House of Representatives.

During the Jan. 10 meeting, President Aliyev noted the active and successful cooperation between the two countries in diverse fields. Such cooperation promotes the expansion of strong partnership ties between Azerbaijan and the United States, he emphasized.

President Aliyev pointed to Azerbaijan's growing participation in the development of the region. He also expressed confidence that the current visit would contribute to the further deepening of partnership relations.

Congressman Schuster praised Azerbaijan for its active participation in the anti-terror coalition, as well as in its commitment of Azerbaijani peacekeepers in Iraq and Afghanistan. He also stressed the importance of Azerbaijan as a partner in the sphere of energy supply and security.

Azerbaijani Defense Minister and Deputy Foreign Minister Meet U.S. Congressional delegation

Azerbaijan's Defense Minister, Safar Abiyev, met with a US Congressional delegation headed by Congressman Bill Schuster on Jan. 11.

Minister Abiyev told the delegation that relations between Azerbaijan and the U.S. are rapidly developing in all areas, including in the sphere of military cooperation. He also confirmed that Azerbaijan's active participation in the global anti-terror coalition would continue to be a priority in the future as well.

In addition, Minister Abiyev informed the delegation of the occupation of 20 percent of Azerbaijani land by Armenian military forces and Armenia's destructive stance in the peaceful resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Congressman Schuster, in his turn, noted that the United States has always supported the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.

Also on the same day, Araz Azimov, Azerbaijan's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs met with the same congressional delegation. Those discussions touched on Azerbaijan-US relations, useful cooperation between GUAM member states and the U.S., and the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Azerbaijan is a key ally of the United States in its fight against terrorism, Congressman Schuster said in talks with journalists on Jan. 11.

"Azerbaijan is our strategic partner and one of the major allies in the region," Shuster said. "Azerbaijan is a close and reliable partner of the U.S. in the fight against international terrorism."

World Bank Forecasts Azerbaijan Will Lead World in Economic Growth Through 2010

The World Bank has published its Global Economic Outlook for 2008 in which it forecasts that Azerbaijan will continue to lead the world in highest economic growth until at least 2010.

Published Jan. 9 the report forecasted that Azerbaijan's economic growth, which was 33.5 percent in 2007, will be 19.4 percent in 2008 and 14.9 percent in 2009.

The report also said that the world's economic growth rate will slow from 3.6 percent in 2007 to 3.3 percent in 2008, returning to 3.6 percent in 2009.

The forecast on the region of Europe and Central Asia is more optimistic: in 2008 the region's GDP growth in market prices are estimated at 6.1 percent, compared to 6.7 percent in 2007. The region's growth in 2009 is forecasted at 5.7 percent.

Between 1991 and 2000, Azerbaijan's GDP reached a peak of 5.2 percent. In 2004 GDP growth stood at 10.2 percent, then 26.4 percent in 2005 and 34.5 percent in 2006.