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## UN rights committee said set to censure Azerbaijan

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Wed Jul 22, 2009 11:14am EDT

\* Killings, attacks on journalists cited

\* Police violence condemned

\* Country "returning to Soviet practices"

By Robert Evans

GENEVA, July 22 (Reuters) - United Nations experts are set to censure energy-rich Azerbaijan over its human rights record after suggesting it was in denial over violations of global rights pacts, officials and diplomats said on Wednesday.

They said the critique, which could be harsh, was likely to be formulated in recommendations to the government in Baku on what it should do to clean up its act. It would be issued on July 31 by the U.N.'s watchdog Human Rights Committee.

"After comments made by committee members this week, it is clear they are going to be tough over attacks on independent journalists, on freedom of expression and on state control of judges," said one official, who asked not to be named.

The 18-member committee, a body made up of independent academics and lawyers from developed and developing countries, met on Monday and Tuesday to quiz an Azeri government team on what was happening in the former Soviet republic.

An official U.N. report on the session said the committee questioned the team on killings and arrests of journalists and suicides of others in police custody, on bans on opposition rallies, on violence against women and

attacks on homosexuals.

Khalaf Khalafov, Azerbaijan's deputy foreign minister, told the committee that journalists were only arrested for violating the law and that any interference with the media or freedom of expression was illegal, according to the report.

One committee expert told Khalafov, the account said, that his country "appeared to be in a state of denial" on police violence, and officials present said the scepticism was clearly shared by other members of the body.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with offices in Baku, including the chairman of an Azeri group on protection of journalists, told reporters after the session that the country appeared sliding back to Soviet-era practices.

And during the committee discussions, Khalafov argued that the traces of the Soviet "totalitarian past" when, he said, the Azeri judiciary had been subject to "the dictatorship of the proletariat," would not disappear overnight.

The committee session was held as a top-level delegation from the European Union, with which Azerbaijan is seeking to boost economic relations especially in the energy sector, was expressing alarm in Baku about rights.

Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, who headed the EU team, told reporters there on Monday that he had expressed concern to President Ilham Aliyev over the arrest of two opposition bloggers who were accused of hooliganism.

At the same time, ambassadors of the 27 EU member states voiced disquiet "about the condition of human rights and freedoms" in the country where Aliyev and his late father have held power almost uninterrupted for nearly three decades.

But at a Geneva news conference, NGOs said they feared the EU was unlikely to go beyond words in its criticism of Azerbaijan, a key supplier of oil and gas from Caspian Sea fields offering an alternative to energy from Russia.

"In our experience, the countries most likely to take a strong stance are the United States and (non-EU member) Norway -- they have their own oil," said Florian Irmingier of the Geneva-based Human Rights House Foundation. (Editing by Jonathan Lynn)

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