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A Youth Forum dedicated to the 25th anniversary of the Day of Azerbaijani Youth has got underway.

President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev attended the Forum.

President Ilham Aliyev made an opening speech at the Forum.

### **Opening speech of President Ilham Aliyev**

--It is the Youth Day in Azerbaijan today. I sincerely congratulate you and all the youth of Azerbaijan on this occasion.

Twenty-five years ago, by the Order of great leader Heydar Aliyev, the Youth Day was established in Azerbaijan, and since then we have been celebrating this day on 2 February. A year earlier, the first Youth Forum had been organized in Azerbaijan on the initiative of Heydar Aliyev. Since then, youth policy has always been among the priorities of the state. A generation has changed since then, and the young people seated in this hall today were either not yet born or were small children. A generation has changed and Azerbaijan has changed.

If we look at the realities of Azerbaijan at that time, we can see that the situation was very difficult back then. Our independence was only six years old and Azerbaijan was just beginning its independent life. The country was faced with major, serious and fundamental problems. Only three years had passed since the first Karabakh war, and there were high hopes that the international community and mediators would soon resolve the Karabakh issue and restore justice. There were such hopes, and the situation in all other areas was very difficult. You did not see those years, of course. But this is our history, and future generations must know and remember this history. Because it is when we make the right analysis and learn from history that we can move forward with confidence.

At that time, Azerbaijan had not yet fully established itself on the world stage. The realities of Azerbaijan were almost unknown to the world community. Armenian lobbying organizations operating against us at that time and to this day have been spreading false and distorted information about Azerbaijan. At that time, of course, one of the most important issues was to take a worthy place in the international arena.

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As for the economic situation, I can say that the concept of the economy did not exist at all at the time. Because after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the principles of a market economy were not fully established in Azerbaijan and private entrepreneurship was at a very low level. Government agencies had not yet mastered new methods of governance. The economic downturn was pervasive and our economic future was in question. Oil and gas contracts had just been signed. In 1994, the Contract of the Century was signed here in this hall, giving us all great hopes. But at that time, of course, it was impossible to predict the implementation of this project. There were hopes, but no confidence. The signing of the contract for the Shah Deniz gas field in 1996 gave us additional hope, but when the Youth Day was established, 25 years ago, of course, no one could have predicted how much these projects would benefit our country.

Hundreds of thousands of IDPs lived in difficult conditions. People expelled from their native lands lived in tents, under wagons and in unsuitable buildings. So this was the picture of those days. In addition, there was no regular army, and the lack of a regular army led to the defeat in the first Karabakh war. Along with all other external factors, along with the large foreign financial and military support provided to Armenia, we must say that there was no regular army in Azerbaijan at that time.

Under such circumstances, Heydar Aliyev established the Youth Day. I remember some people – I mean those in the government – saying that this was not the main issue; that there are other important issues facing the country, which had to be addressed. However, as always, the Great Leader turned to the youth with great vision, invited them, gave them his recommendations, and practical steps were taken to organize and prepare the youth for future development. If we look at this small historical note, we can see how right Heydar Aliyev was. Because young people, making up a large part of our society, play a very important role in the life of our country today. The initiatives of the young people, their work are visible everywhere today, and of course, the upbringing of the new generation in the spirit of patriotism, on the basis of loyalty to the state occupies an important place among Heydar Aliyev's contributions.

Today, of course, Azerbaijan is moving forward with confidence, the main tasks facing the country have been resolved. I mean the Karabakh issue, of course. We are confident in other areas too. It will take me a few hours to list the main highlights of recent years. I just want to say that the opportunities for today's youth are, of course, broader, and young people should take advantage of these opportunities. We live in a free country, we live in a stable country, we live in a confident country. We are rightly proud to be citizens of Azerbaijan, and young people must be active both in determining their future and giving maximum benefit to the state. By saying these words, I also want to say my heartfelt words of gratitude to the youth of Azerbaijan. Because in many cases, especially in the patriotic war, the role of youth proved decisive, and we can rightly be proud of our youth.

Dear friends, I congratulate you once again on this event, on this date, and I would like to conclude my opening speech here. Because I know there are many issues of interest to

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you, there are many questions to be discussed, and I suggest that we start discussions.

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The Forum then continued with discussions.

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