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Turkey: Recent human rights violations must be investigated

Amnesty International last week called on the Turkish government to investigate all allegations of human rights violations arising in the context of recent violent protests in the south-east of the country and spreading through sporadic incidents to Istanbul.

After the funerals in Diyarbakir on 28 March of four members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), who had been killed by the security forces, demonstrations escalated into violent protests during which demonstrators threw stones and Molotov cocktails, and damaged property. Four individuals were shot dead by the security forces. In subsequent days, during further violent demonstrations in Diyarbakir and other towns in the region including Batman, Kiziltepe, Siirt and Nusaybin, the number of civilians killed rose to 13, at least four of them children. According to the available autopsy reports most of them died as a result of gunshot wounds. Many demonstrators and law enforcement officials were injured. On 2 April, in Istanbul, three women were crushed to death by a bus which was set alight following a Molotov cocktail attack allegedly perpetrated by demonstrators. During these incidents, hundreds of demonstrators, including children, were detained. The majority of detainees in Diyarbakir alleged that they were subjected to ill-treatment on apprehension, and torture or other ill-treatment once in custody.

In its letter to the Turkish Minister of Justice, Amnesty International acknowledged the difficulties faced by law enforcement officials while policing violent demonstrations and unconditionally condemned the human rights abuses committed by demonstrators which resulted in serious injury to civilians and law enforcement officers.

At the same time the organization called on the Turkish authorities to investigate all allegations of excessive use of force resulting in deaths of demonstrators by law enforcement officials during the policing of violent demonstrations, and to ensure that, should such allegations prove to be true, the perpetrators be brought to justice. It also called on them to ensure that the provisions of the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials are upheld in the policing of all demonstrations, whether violent or not.

In light of the reported decline in the use of torture in recent years, especially in the Diyarbakir region, Amnesty International was particularly disturbed at allegations of torture or ill-treatment of detainees, including beatings, death threats and being stripped naked and sprayed with cold water. There were also reports of irregular detention procedures, and of lawyers' access to detainees being barred – in one case by force – by law enforcement officials.

Amnesty International called on the Turkish authorities, in the context of their own "zero tolerance" policy towards torture, to fulfil Turkey's international legal obligations as a State Party to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the UN Convention

against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment by carrying out prompt, impartial and thorough investigations into all such complaints and to bring their alleged perpetrators to justice.

At the time that Amnesty International wrote to the authorities, 57 of the 91 minors detained during the events in Diyarbakir remained in prison pending trial. Some of them alleged ill-treatment or torture in custody, and their lawyers suggest that they were also subjected to irregular detention procedures. Amnesty International noted that some of the minors could face charges under articles of the Turkish Penal Code which fall under the jurisdiction of the Anti-Terror Law, and that in the case of at least one possible charge the penalty is life imprisonment.

Amnesty International called on the Turkish authorities to extend to all children remanded to prison the particular protection they are afforded by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Turkey is a State Party by ensuring prompt, thorough and impartial investigations into the allegations of ill-treatment or torture in police custody, releasing children from prison at the earliest opportunity unless their prolonged detention could be adequately justified, and ensuring that no person below the age of 18 would face a sentence of life imprisonment without possibility of release.

Amnesty International continues to monitor the human rights situation in Turkey, particularly in the south-east.