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Turkey: Protecting the torturers? Grave concerns at trial proceedings in Iskenderun

A trial of police officers in Turkey accused of the torture and rape of two teenagers is to resume on Friday 22 April. The two young women have still not received justice six years after the judicial process first began. Amnesty International has serious concerns about the proceedings and will send observers to monitor the trial.

"The repeated delays have called into question the ability of the courts to bring suspected perpetrators of human rights violations to justice," said Amnesty International. "The Turkish authorities must take steps to ensure that all allegations of torture are immediately investigated thoroughly, independently and impartially, and any perpetrators are brought swiftly to justice."

Nazime Ceren Salmanoglu, then 16 years old, and Fatma Deniz Polatta*, then 19 years old, were detained by police officers and taken to the Anti-Terror Branch of Police Headquarters in Iskenderun in early March 1999. They say they were subjected to horrific torture including rape, beatings, suspension by the arms as well as forced "virginity tests" by doctors. The "confessions" obtained under this torture provided the basis for sentencing the women to long prison terms.

There is an increasing risk that the case will reach the statute of limitations -- in this case seven and a half years - and charges against the suspects will be dropped. Amnesty International is also calling on the Turkish government to remove the statute of limitations in cases of serious human rights violations such as torture and killings by the security forces.

From the start obstacles have impeded the case's progress. State doctors' reports initially covered up the torture, which led the prosecutor to decide there were no grounds for a trial to be opened. Extensive psychiatric evaluations subsequently corroborated the allegations of torture, so that the prosecutor's decision was overturned. The trial finally began on 14 April 2000, but then the court waited 28 months for medical reports to be forwarded from Turkey's Forensic Medical Institute.

This is not the first time the Turkish justice system has failed victims of human rights violations, particularly where police officers stand accused of torture and other abuse. In November last year Amnesty International highlighted several other cases in which, despite the Turkish government's declaration of 'zero tolerance for torture', the courts were unwilling or unable to take action.

For background information please see press releases *Turkey: Kurdish girls raped and sexually abused in police custody*, 19 November 1999, and *Turkey: Insufficient and inadequate -- judicial remedies against torturers and killers*, 16 November 2004.

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