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Turkey: CPT calls for review of situation of Abdullah Öcalan

The Turkish authorities should “completely review the situation of Abdullah Öcalan with a view to integrating him into a setting where contacts with other inmates and a wider range of activities are possible”, according to a report by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) published today.

Abdullah Öcalan is serving life imprisonment following his conviction in 1999 on charges of “treason and separatism” as leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). He has been the sole inmate in the prison on İmralı island near Bursa since 1999.

During their visit to Turkey from 19-22 May 2007, the CPT went to İmralı and interviewed and examined Abdullah Öcalan. While the material conditions in which he is detained continued to be reported as satisfactory, Amnesty International notes that the CPT considers it necessary to revise its earlier assessment that “the situation of indisputable isolation to which the prisoner has been subjected since 16 February 1999 [...] had not revealed significant harmful consequences for his physical and psychological condition”. This revision is called for “in the light of the evolution of Abdullah Öcalan’s physical and mental condition”.

Regarding Abdullah Öcalan’s physical health, the findings of experts appointed by the CPT “indicate that the prisoner has not been the subject of intoxication by heavy metals” as Abdullah Öcalan’s lawyers publicly alleged in May 2007, and that his only “major” physical health problem is an unrelated condition linked to surgery performed prior to his imprisonment. However, the report documents “a distinct deterioration of his mental state since [the CPT’s earlier visits in] 2001 and 2003. This deterioration is connected with a situation of chronic stress and prolonged social and emotional isolation, coupled with a feeling of abandonment and disappointment.” The CPT notes that some of these symptoms are linked with his physical condition. However it also states that, “the reversal of the process...can only be durably achieved through a fundamental change in the prisoner’s human environment and the ending of his social and emotional isolation. In particular he should be placed under a detention regime in which he has regular and sustained contact with other persons with whom he can communicate and share recreational and social activities.”

Amnesty International has long stated its belief that solitary confinement of any prisoner carries the risk of serious mental and physical harm and can amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment. The organization has called on the Turkish authorities to take steps to end the isolation of Abdullah Öcalan, whose visits from relatives and lawyers have often been cancelled by the authorities on the grounds that bad weather prevents safe crossing to the island where he is held.

Given Turkey's obligations under international human rights law to protect a person's right to mental and physical integrity, and given the CPT's conclusions that Abdullah Öcalan's right has been violated, Amnesty International reiterates its call for steps to be taken to end his isolation.

See: <http://www.cpt.coe.int/documents/tur/2008-03-06-eng.htm>

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