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Turkey: Isolation and beatings in new prisons must stop now

The human rights groups Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have urged immediate reforms to the Turkish penal system after receiving reports of torture and beatings against prisoners transferred to smaller cells in a recent high-profile operation.

Representatives of the groups are currently in Turkey to research the operation conducted in 20 prisons in December 2000 and to investigate conditions at the new F-type prisons to which many of the prisoners were transferred. At least 29 prisoners and two soldiers died in the operation. The researchers have spoken with doctors, lawyers who visited the new prisons, relatives of prisoners and three prisoners who had been released from the F-type prisons.

These sources consistently indicate that the prisoners were beaten and some tortured before, during and after the transfers to the new prisons. It is alleged that prisoners were stripped and subjected to rape with a truncheon on arrival at Kandira F-type prison near Izmit, but the claims could not be corroborated because lawyers' requests for forensic examinations to be carried out received no response.

All reports confirm that a regime of solitary and small group isolation is being imposed in the new F-type prisons - in breach of Justice Ministry undertakings. Many prisoners have gone without human contact for days, apart from roll-calls which were frequently accompanied by violence. Some prisoners in solitary isolation have not been seen by anyone from the outside world since mid-December.

Prisoners were not permitted into the small exercise yard attached to the individual cells until the last few days. To the knowledge of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, none of the prisoners in the F-type prisons have been brought out of their units for recreation, proper exercise or sport, nor have they been permitted to associate with other prisoners. The prisoners have also complained that very loud music has been piped into the corridors outside the units.

"Our investigations suggest that transferred prisoners have been held in isolation and have been tortured or ill-treated," said the researchers from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. "The torture of a human being is an act of cruelty that is prohibited by international human rights law. Isolation can cause physical and mental harm and may amount to cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment. The Turkish government is accountable and must put an immediate stop to these abuses."

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch sought talks with the Justice Ministry as well as access to the prisons, but on both counts the requests were refused. They did meet with representatives of the Human Rights Commission of the Turkish Parliament and the Human Rights Association.

At least 300 prisoners are on hunger strike, and many have been fasting for more than 70 days. It appears likely that deaths will occur in the next few days. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are very alarmed at the recent developments in the Turkish prison system, and urgently recommend that the Turkish government ensures:

access to prisons by lawyers and independent doctors in order to examine the allegations of torture and ill-treatment, and to provide necessary medical care.

that the regime of intense small group and solitary isolation in the F-type prisons be lifted, and doors to prisoner units be left open during the day to permit prisoners within each small cluster of units to associate.

broad access to representatives of bar, medical and human rights associations to ensure that the new prisons are run in accordance with Turkish law and international standards for the humane treatment of prisoners.

The groups also urge the Council of Europe with its expertise in the area of prison management to take an active interest in the crisis.

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