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Turkey: Ak_n Birdal adopted as prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International

Amnesty International has adopted Ak_n Birdal, President of the Turkish Human Rights Association (HRA), as prisoner of conscience, strongly condemning his imprisonment today.

“Human rights defenders should never be prosecuted in connection with their legitimate activities and for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression,” Amnesty International stressed. “We are adopting Ak_n Birdal now as a prisoner of conscience and will campaign for his immediate and unconditional release.”

Pierre Sané, Amnesty International’s Secretary General, has personally written to Mr Birdal to express his support:

"Our organization is outraged that just one year after you barely survived a callous attempt on your life the Turkish authorities are enforcing a verdict which is clearly in violation of Article 10 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, without regard to your continued need for rehabilitative treatment usually not available in prison," Mr Sané said.

Amnesty International fears that Ak_n Birdal's imprisonment is part of the government's effort to discredit and hinder the work of human rights defenders and will lead to a major setback for human rights in Turkey.

His prosecution coincides with a wider pattern of systematic harassment of the HRA -- Turkey’s largest independent human rights organization -- by the Turkish state in an apparent attempt to stifle the organization’s activities permanently. Several branches have been closed -- the branch in Diyarbakir since May 1997.

As a result of this, the HRA now has limited capacity to monitor the human rights situation in the region under state of emergency, where human rights violations have been even more severe than in the rest of the country.

The HRA has outspokenly condemned human rights violations committed by both the government and armed opposition groups, but its work is often presented by the Turkish government and mainstream media as undermining Turkey's interest and reputation.

In such a highly-charged context, the HRA officials have been threatened, arrested, prosecuted, abducted and 11 of them killed. These killings have never been investigated properly. Akin Birdal himself was the target of an assault on 12 May 1998 in which he nearly lost his life and from which he has not yet fully recovered.

In addition to campaigning for Mr Birdal's immediate and unconditional release, Amnesty International will also campaign for the reform of all articles of the Turkish Penal Code and the Anti-Terror Law restricting the right to freedom of peaceful expression, for all closed branches of the HRA to be reopened, and for all human rights defenders to be allowed to pursue unhindered their lawful role of monitoring and reporting human rights matters, as set out in the UN Human Rights Defenders Resolution of 9 December 1998.

Background

In October 1998, the Appeal Court confirmed a sentence of one year's imprisonment for "inciting people to hatred and enmity on the basis of class, race or regional differences" under Article 312(2) of the Turkish Penal Code. Ak_n Birdal's offence had been to call for a peaceful approach to the issue of Turkey's Kurdish minority and to use the phrase "the Kurdish people" in a speech made at a public meeting in September 1996.

In April 1999, another sentence of one year's imprisonment under Art. 8 of the "Anti-Terror Law" was confirmed for a speech he made on 6 September 1995 at a peace festival panel. Ak_n Birdal has a number of other prosecutions pending against him for his public statements and activities as HRA President; so many, in fact, that he himself has lost count.

**In April this year, Amnesty International's German Section awarded Mr Birdal a special human rights prize in recognition of his efforts as a human rights defender.
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