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Turkey: Amnesty International urges new President to work for reforms in human rights

Amnesty International today welcomed the commitment of the new Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer to legal and constitutional reforms.

"Turkey has taken some limited steps in the past 12 months to improve human rights, but Amnesty International believes that they do not go far enough. Despite legal reforms in the right direction, Amnesty International continues to be seriously concerned about human rights violations in Turkey," The human rights organization said.

Amnesty International called on the new President to use his authority to instigate a process of swift and thorough legal reforms in order to bring Turkish law on freedom of expression into line with international human rights law.

"The government should ensure that no article of domestic law is used to suppress freedom of expression." Amnesty International said. The organization reminded the President that trials continue to be opened against those who express dissenting opinions on the Kurdish issue and on the role of Islam.

Freedom of speech is curbed in Turkey in particular by the use of Article 312 of the Turkish Penal Code. Some prominent victims of this article include the leading human rights activist and former head of the

Human Rights Association, Akin Birdal, who was reimprisoned on 28 March 2000, the lawyer and human rights activist, Esber Yagmurdereli, who has been imprisoned since June 1998, the former mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and the recently sentenced former prime minister and leader of the banned Welfare Party, Necmettin Erbakan.

The organization drew the new President's attention to persistent harassment of and attempts to suppress human rights defenders by the authorities.

"Amnesty International on 12 May learnt with surprise and regret that the Diyarbakir branch of the Human Rights Association had again been closed by the offices of the Governor of the Provinces under Emergency Rule and of the Diyarbakir Governor. This was only 23 days after the branch had been permitted to reopen following almost three years of closure."

Amnesty International urged President Sezer to exercise his good offices to have steps taken that will lead to the immediate reopening of the Diyarbakir branch of the Human Rights Association.

The organization believes that the closure of the branches of the Human Rights Association is intended to prevent the Association from effective monitoring of human rights violations. This may lead to an increase in human rights violations and give confidence to perpetrators of human rights violations that their crimes will not be investigated or punished.

Torture and incommunicado detention in Turkey persist as a major concern for Amnesty International. "Clear guidelines should be set up to ensure that all detainees have in practice immediate access to legal counsel", Amnesty International said. "A concrete step to promote

accountability by police and to end torture would be to end the practice of blindfolding in police custody."

"Police, gendarmerie or special anti-terror forces who believe that prosecution is a remote possibility are more likely to ill-treat and torture detainees", the organization said. "Therefore complaints and reports of torture or ill-treatment, "disappearance" and extrajudicial execution should be promptly and effectively investigated. Those responsible for human rights violations should be brought to justice."

Amnesty International called on President Sezer to show leadership to ensure that the Turkish Government perseveres with the necessary legislative and procedural reforms to afford its citizens proper safeguards. The government must also exercise close scrutiny of the security forces to ensure that existing provisions are observed.

Amnesty International also urged President Sezer to uphold the existing moratorium on executions and to demonstrate his support for the unconditional legal abolition of the death penalty in Turkey.

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