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Turkey: A sea of flowers for Akin Birdal

Amnesty International welcomes the imminent release of human rights activist Akin Birdal from the Ankara Central Prison on Saturday noon.

Akin Birdal was put on trial because he called for a peaceful approach to the Kurdish issue in speeches made in 1998 and 1996. He has been imprisoned since 23 March 2000, sentenced under Article 312 of the Turkish Penal Code. Amnesty International adopted Akin Birdal as a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned solely because he used his right to freedom of expression.

"The Turkish government must amend or repeal Article 312 of the Penal Code in order to prevent it being used to restrict freedom of expression," Amnesty International said.

A "sea of flowers" near the prison will be arranged in a gesture of support for Akin Birdal's release and as a reminder of other prisoners of conscience in Turkey. Charges continue to be brought against people who have peacefully expressed their views.

In an appeal to be published in several Turkish newspapers Amnesty International will call for the repeal of Article 312. The organization is also campaigning for a profound reform of the law that ensures that no one can be imprisoned for peaceful freedom of expression.

Background

Akin Birdal, former President of the Turkish Human Rights Association (HRA) and prominent human rights activist, was imprisoned from 3 June 1999 until 25 September 1999 when he was released temporarily for medical reasons. He was re-imprisoned on 28 March 2000 despite a medical report warning that his injuries resulting from an assassination attempt in 1998 posed a risk to his life. Amnesty International adopted

Akin Birdal as a prisoner of conscience and called for his unconditional release.

He was sentenced for "inciting people to hatred and enmity on the basis of class, race or regional difference". His offence was to call for a peaceful approach to the Kurdish issue and to use the phrase "the Kurdish people" in speeches he made at public meetings in September 1995 and September 1996.

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