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Turkey: Justice Ministry must speak before prison hunger strike claims lives

Political prisoners -- hunger striking in several Turkish prisons -- are demanding that the Justice Ministry abandon any plans they may have to impose a regime of isolation. In Erzurum Special and E-type prisons, where the right of prisoners to associate is the key issue, the hunger strike has reached its 50th day and at least seven prisoners are reported to be in a critical condition.

“The Justice Ministry must clarify as soon as possible whether or not it intends to operate a regime of isolation,” Amnesty International said. “The operation of such regime would constitute a violation of international law.”

“We call upon the Justice Ministry immediately to disclose detailed plans for the association and activities programs that will accompany the opening of the small dormitories in Turkish prisons, and to give clear guarantees that it has no intention of operating a regime of solitary or small group isolation,” Amnesty International said.

Construction of wings based on a small dormitory system have been completed in several prisons but have not yet been put into use on a large scale. Amnesty International believes that any such system must ensure that it provides for an adequate period each day in which prisoners can associate with others outside the confines of the dormitory.

The prisoners and their families, however, fear that the dormitories will be used as cells in the context of a system of small group isolation. Their fears are well founded given that the Article 16 of the Anti-Terror Law lays down a draconian regime of intense isolation for those held in custody for political offences, in which “convicted prisoners will not be permitted contact or communication with other convicted prisoners.”

The Anti-Terror Law covers many non-violent offences. An attempt to establish such a regime took place in 1991 at Eski_ehir Prison, where cells had been constructed so that prisoners would not even see their jailers. The first transfers were accompanied by brutal attacks on the prisoners. After an outcry inside Turkey and abroad, the transfers were halted and the cells at Eski_ehir Prison modified.

The danger to the physical and mental health of prisoners presented by prolonged isolation (including small-group isolation) is generally recognized. As the European Commission of Human Rights states, “The international literature on criminology and psychology indicates that isolation can be sufficient in itself gravely to impair physical and mental health. The following conditions may be diagnosed: chronic apathy, fatigue, emotional instability, difficulties of concentration, diminution of mental faculties, disorders of the neuro-vegetative system.”

Operation of small dormitories along the lines laid down by the Anti-Terror Law would result in prison conditions amounting to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. As such they would be prohibited by international human rights treaties to which Turkey is a State Party -- specifically Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, and Article 16 of the United Nations Convention against Torture.

Amnesty International today wrote to the Justice Minister Oltan Sungurlu asking for information about the planned changes to the Turkish prison system, and expressing urgency in the light of the hunger strikes.

Twelve people died during a hunger strike in Turkish prisons in 1996.
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