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Turkey: Government crackdown on Human Rights Defenders follows criticism of Northern Iraq incursion

The arrests of the presidents of two branches of the Human Rights Association (HRA) and the closures of several HRA offices over the past month demonstrates the Turkish Government's clear intention to stifle domestic criticism of the Turkish armed forces incursion into Northern Iraq in May, Amnesty International said today.

The incursion into Northern Iraq is being conducted under what amounts to a news blackout. Human rights monitors and independent journalists are not being permitted into the area.

"We are extremely worried about the arrest of the HRA members -- since the 1990s HRA members have faced relentless police intimidation, including imprisonment and torture," Amnesty International said. The HRA was subjected to a bombing campaign, and several members have been killed -- some in circumstances strongly suggesting that security forces were involved.

The human rights organization will be making strong presentations directly to the Turkish Government itself, and will be asking those governments which are Turkey's counterparts in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Council of Europe to use their influence to have the branches re-opened and the human rights defenders released.

"If Turkish governments since the mid-1980s have gained any credit in the field of human rights, it has been that they have permitted the establishment of the HRA which operates an effective network of monitors -- many of them lawyers," Amnesty International said.

"But this latest round of repression, clearly prompted by HRA officials' criticism of the Northern Iraq venture, puts in question recent government assurances that a new human rights chapter was about to be written."

The Turkish authorities have closed the HRA offices in Diyarbakır, Malatya, Izmir and Konya arrested the presidents of the Ankara and _anlı_ürfa branches.

The Diyarbakır branch was closed on 24 May, the Malatya branch on 4 June, the Izmir branch on 19 June and the Konya branch on 24 June. The pretext for the closures in all cases is that the associations were acting outside their authority, and in some cases were in possession of prohibited political literature.

Yıldız Temurtürkan (f), president of HRA Ankara was arrested from a demonstration concerning the Northern Iraq incursion on 7 June, and now faces bogus charges of supporting the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK). Amnesty International considers her to be a prisoner of conscience. Aziz Durmaz, president of the _anlı_ürfa branch, was taken into incommunicado police custody on 24 June on the same charge. The human rights organization is closely monitoring their cases.

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