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TURKEY: WIDESPREAD HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN THE NAME OF STATE SECURITY

ISTANBUL -- The 1990s have seen a steady erosion of human rights in Turkey with the authorities attempting to excuse, ignore or cover up the abuses - like torture, political killings and "disappearances" - in the name of national security, Amnesty International said today as it launched a worldwide campaign on human rights violations in the country.

"Why are these terrible things allowed to go on in Turkey - a society with traditions of tolerance, a history of parliamentary democracy, whose people are admired and respected for their kindness and hospitality by all who visit the country?" asked Pierre Sané, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

"Why doesn't the Turkish Government take steps to protect its citizens from its security forces? The international intergovernmental organizations also have a responsibility here: the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations (UN) know what Amnesty International knows about the torture, killing and disappearance - why do they choose not to act?"

Amnesty International's new report published today documents the crescendo of human rights violations in Turkey during the 1990s, and highlights the urgent need for legal reforms and governmental and international action.

"Widespread human rights violations are taking place not only in the southeast but everywhere in Turkey. On the pretext of guaranteeing state security, the Turkish state is failing to safeguard its citizens' own security," Mr Sané said.

"We don't understand how measures which permit torture - including the torture of people detained on suspicion of common criminal offences, of vulnerable people, of children and of handicapped persons - can contribute to the security of the state. On the contrary, these abhorrent practices put all Turkish citizens at risk."

The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (ECPT) has described the incidence of torture and ill-treatment in Turkey as "widespread". The UN Committee on Torture used the term "systematic".

The 1990s presented Turkish citizens with unprecedented grounds for fear: extrajudicial executions and "disappearances" began to be committed on the streets of Istanbul and the capital Ankara, as well as in the cities of the southeast, scene of a 12-year-old conflict with the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK). In 1995 a UN working group stated that Turkey had been the country with the highest number of reported "disappearances" in the world in 1994.

The assault on freedom of expression has taken a further turn for the worse. While the risk of being imprisoned for expressing opinions decreased during the 1990s, journalists now face a real risk of “disappearing” or being shot dead or beaten to death for their professional activities.

The human rights organization also expressed concern about the use of the Anti-Terror Law to prosecute and imprison writers, publishers and politicians for expressing opinions displeasing to the state.

“After little more than cosmetic changes to the law in late 1995, we fear that imprisonments are beginning once again,” Mr Sané said. In August 1996 publisher Ayşe Nur Zarakolu began serving a six-month sentence under the Anti-Terror Law for her publishing activities. Former parliamentary deputy Ibrahim Aksoy has been imprisoned in Ankara Central Closed Prison for his speeches and writings since October 1995.

Also in August 1996 a warrant was issued for the rearrest of Mehdi Zana, former prisoner of conscience. Hundreds of other Turkish citizens face possible imprisonment under the Anti-Terror Law -- including 184 of Turkey’s leading writers, artists and publishers indicted in a single trial at Istanbul State Security Court.

“Successive Turkish governments have failed to fulfil the obligations they have freely entered into under international law. Police and gendarmes enjoy impunity because they are regarded as the guardians of the state, and it appears that the Turkish state is enjoying a similar exemption from scrutiny, criticism and sanction by the international community because of its strategic position as a border guard of the western world, as well as because of its commercial and economic weight,” Mr Sané said.

“We want to remind the international community and those countries which have special relations with Turkey of their obligation to ensure that, if Turkey continues to refuse to cooperate with international human rights bodies, then action must be taken to hold Turkey to account.”

Amnesty International is also calling on countries selling arms and military equipment to Turkey to make sure that the arms and equipment they supply is not used to commit human right violations. The human rights organization has documented the use of US and UK-made helicopters and armoured cars in operations of massive human rights violations by the security forces in Kurdish-populated areas of the southeast.

Amnesty International’s report also gives information about human rights abuses by armed opposition groups. Illegal opposition groups which have turned to violence to pursue their political aims have killed unarmed civilians who took no part in the conflict. They have also killed their own members in the name of the party, killed Kurdish peasants in the name of liberation and killed Muslims in the name of Islam. Groups responsible for such violations include the PKK, DHKP-C, TIKKO and IBDA-C. Some of these groups have deliberately and arbitrarily killed non-combatant women, children and prisoners.

Amnesty International has strongly and publicly condemned such abuses. In the past three years there was some reduction in the number of civilians killed by the PKK but the killings continue and Amnesty International’s members will therefore continue to maintain their pressure.

In contrast with the dramatic facts exposed, Amnesty International's report states that the conditions exist in Turkey for reforms which could decisively change the situation. The human rights organization is putting forward a set of recommendations to the Turkish Government with a view to substantially reducing the scope of human rights violations. These recommendations are:

- to conduct thorough and impartial investigations into all the cases of reported "disappearances" in security forces custody and extrajudicial executions;
- to ensure that prisoners are guarded by officers under the authority of the Ministry of Justice and never by police or gendarmerie officers;
- to release immediately and unconditionally all prisoners of conscience;
- to give access to legal counsel to all the detainees, including those detained on suspicion of offences under the Anti-Terror Law ;
- to reduce the maximum period of police detention, currently 30 days, so that detainees are brought before a judge without delay ;
- to abolish incommunicado detention;
- to instruct judges that imprisonment for expression of non-violent opinions violates international treaties signed by Turkey; and
- not to apply the legal provisions which permit the government to block prosecutions of security forces personnel in cases of extrajudicial execution, "disappearance", torture or ill-treatment by police or other civil servants.

"In summary, we are asking the Turkish Government to do no more than to apply the international legislation it has freely ratified as well as the domestic laws intended to protect the fundamental rights of Turkish citizens," Mr Sané said.

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