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**WHAT GOVERNMENT WOULD NOT WISH TO BE SEEN AS A DEFENDER OF
CHILDREN'S HUMAN RIGHTS?**

Opinion piece by Pierre Sané, Secretary General, Amnesty International

Just last year, Turkey made a very public pledge to uphold the right of all children not to be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Turkey ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is the public face of the Turkish Government -- the one the Turkish politicians, diplomats and generals want your government to see.

But that same government has another face. It is a face which your government would probably recognize, but has too often chosen to ignore. In the very same year that Turkey declared that the torture of children was not to be tolerated, five school students in Manisa reported that during their detention police blindfolded them, stripped them naked, hosed them with cold water and subjected them to electric shocks -- including to their genitalia.

The boys were allegedly raped with truncheons, while the girls were also threatened with rape and forced gynaecological examinations. These students had been charged with membership in or connections with an illegal political organization. None of them was older than 16 years of age. How can a government pledged to uphold the human rights of its children allow state agents to commit such shocking violations?

One 14-year-old boy gave the following account of his ordeal: "I had to undress...They asked questions that were nothing to do with me; when I said I did not know, they twisted my testicles...Four of them held me by the hands and arms and gave electric shocks to my right thumb, to my sexual organs, to my arms and to my stomach...Afterwards I had no feeling in my right foot and sexual organ." This and other torture testimonies are supported by medical reports from the hospitals where the students were treated during their detention. In June 1996, 10 police officers were indicted for ill-treatment and using torture to extract confessions.

So which is the true face of Turkey? The valued member of the international community which has promised to protect the human rights of **all** its citizens? Or the country where torture has long been endemic -- as documented by Amnesty International for more than three decades?

The Turkish Government and your own government may well wish to focus on the first, more agreeable image. The one polished and sold in the corridors of Geneva, Strasbourg and Brussels by the skilful diplomats and the clever public relations agents. Better for NATO strategy, better for European geopolitical interests, better for business they might argue. They may even suggest that sometimes national security concerns have to come before human rights -- especially when you are facing a threat from armed opposition groups who are themselves frequently perpetrators of human rights abuses.

But what about the security of the five students from Manisa? Of the elderly, the children, the women, the members of minority groups, the lawyers, doctors, and even members of parliament who are at risk of torture or ill-treatment in police custody in Turkey? Surely true security for any country must be based upon human rights guarantees for **all** its citizens. After all, human rights violations are criminal offences in Turkey. Torture, "disappearance" and political killings by the security forces are outlawed in Turkish domestic legislation and by international human rights treaties which Turkey is obliged to uphold. Yet these violations are committed on a gross scale. No government has ever made a systematic attempt to eradicate them.

Amnesty International believes that this situation is not beyond remedy. In its current international campaign on Turkey, the organization has proposed a program of practical, realistic reforms which the Turkish Government could implement at once given sufficient political will. Amnesty International believes that with the firm backing of the international community, this program could bring about an immediate improvement in the human rights of **all** Turkish citizens. Likewise, the human rights organization is calling on armed opposition groups in the country to end human rights abuses for which they are responsible -- and to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law.

Governments around the world must recognize that the time has come to end their reluctance to act decisively on Turkey human rights record. There can be no justification for the torture of the five students from Manisa -- or for the countless other Turkish citizens who have glimpsed the state's less public face behind locked doors. There can be no security without human rights.

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