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TURKEY: THE CASE OF DR. ISMAIL BESIKÇI

The Turkish sociologist and writer Ismail Besikçi, who has been adopted three times by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience because of his writings on the Kurds in Turkey, was rearrested in Istanbul on 12 March 1990. He was summoned from Ankara, where he has lived since his release in May 1987, to the State Security Court in Istanbul in connection with his most recent book, entitled Kurdistan: The Colony between the States. The book was published by Alan Publishing House, Istanbul, in February, and was confiscated immediately. On 12 March, Ismail Besikçi was charged under Article 142/3 of the Turkish Penal Code, which proscribes making "separatist propaganda", and taken to Sagmalcilar Prison, Istanbul. Alan Publishing House is also facing prosecution.

Turkey has a Kurdish ethnic minority estimated to be some 10 million people, which is not officially recognized by the authorities. Even the right to enjoy a separate cultural identity has been denied by successive governments, and the public use of the Kurdish language is prohibited. The Kurdish population lives mainly in southeastern Turkey. In the past two years the Kurdish question has been discussed more and more openly in the press, in parliament and in public events, meeting with official sanctions in some cases.

Ismail Besikçi, 51, served three terms of imprisonment in connection with his writings on the Kurds. He was first imprisoned in 1971, convicted of making propaganda for separatism, and adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience. He was released in 1974 following a general amnesty. In 1979 he was tried and sentenced to three years' imprisonment for "conducting propaganda aimed at weakening the national unity of Turkey, and for insulting the memory of the founder of modern Turkey, Kemal Ataturk". After having served this sentence he was released in April 1981, only to be rearrested in June because of a letter he had written from prison to the President of the Swiss Writers' Association, in which he referred to the situation of the Kurds in Turkey. A copy was found in the prison after his release. Deemed to have harmed Turkey's reputation abroad by this letter, which had not been made public at the time the trial took place, he was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment. Having served six years, he was released in May 1987 on remission for the remainder, which would be forfeited by any new conviction.

Ismail Besikçi, who never advocated violence in his writings, is considered to be a prisoner of conscience and his imprisonment to be in violation of his right to freedom of expression, as set out in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, to which Turkey is a State Party. Amnesty International is appealing for his immediate and unconditional release.

UPDATE 19 APRIL 1990

The first hearing in the trial of Ismail Besikçi before Istanbul State Security Court on 18 April was attended by an Amnesty International observer. He learned that three books by Ismail Besikçi had been confiscated and that there were separate indictments for the first two books, each charging the author under Article 142/3 with "making separatist propaganda". Article 142/3 carries on conviction a sentence of five to 10 years. A third indictment may also be prepared and all three eventually combined into one. The second book, for which the author is indicted, is entitled Bilim-Resmi Ideoloji, Devlet-Demokrasi ve Kurt Sorunu (Science Versus Official Ideology, State Versus Democracy and the Kurdish Question) and the third carries the title Bir Ayd_n, Bir Orgut ve Kurt Sorunu (An Intellectual, An Organization and the Kurdish Question). In view of the long prison sentence demanded, the court rejected the lawyers' application for provisional release. Ayse Zarakolu, the owner of Alan Publishing House, which published all three books, is standing trial together with the author on identical charges, but she remained free. The next hearing is scheduled for 15 May.