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Turkey: Authorities must ensure relatives of people forcibly disappeared can continue with their peaceful weekly vigil

Police in Istanbul used unnecessary and excessive force to break up a peaceful vigil by relatives of people who have been forcibly disappeared on Saturday 25 August 2018. The weekly peaceful vigil in Beyoğlu district was due to mark the 700th week of the protest since 1995 and is known as the “Saturday Mothers” vigil. The long standing peaceful vigil was first started as a protest by relatives of the hundreds of reported cases of enforced disappearances that took place during the 1980s and 1990s. In the vast majority of cases the exact circumstances of the disappearances are still unknown, including the fate and whereabouts of hundreds of victims, and those responsible have not been brought to justice.

Police used tear gas, water cannons and plastic bullets against those assembled, including relatives of people forcibly disappeared, human rights defenders and parliamentarians, as well as journalists covering the vigil. According to lawyers present at the scene, 47 participants were ill-treated and detained but were released from police custody later that day after providing their statements.

Amnesty International calls on the Turkish authorities to carry out a prompt, impartial, independent and effective investigation into the allegations of unnecessary and excessive use of force and ill-treatment committed by police officers against those who gathered to demand accountability for enforced disappearances. The authorities must also ensure that Saturday Mothers can continue with their weekly peaceful gathering as planned at Galatasaray square.

When they met for the 700th time on 25 August 2018, organisers were approached by the police who told them that they must disperse as the gathering had been banned by the district governor, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Interior. When participants refused to leave, the police intervened to disperse the crowd by force using tear gas, water cannons and plastic bullets.

According to three participants who spoke to Amnesty International, corroborated by video footage, police hit and dragged participants on the ground. Police tied the hands of those detained behind their backs with zip ties known as “plastic handcuffs” before transferring them to three separate police buses. The three participants told Amnesty International that some of the people taking part in the peaceful vigil sustained severe bruising and cuts on their bodies due to the blows by the police officers.

Detainees were held handcuffed in the police buses for at least seven hours before finally going through medical checks and being transferred to Istanbul Security Directorate, the main police headquarters in the city, to have their testimonies taken.

So far, 12 of those who were detained have approached the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (TIHV) to have their injuries assessed and documented by independent doctors. Speaking to Amnesty International, TIHV doctors stated that one person had a broken finger and another a broken wrist sustained as a result of excessive force by police. All 12 vigil participants had sustained bruising consistent with being held with handcuffs for a lengthy period of time and some had also severe bruising consistent with being beaten. Lawyers told Amnesty International that after obtaining necessary medical reports, those who sustained injuries will lodge criminal complaints against the police officers for the abuse that they suffered.

Lawyers told Amnesty International that those detained are accused of 'contravening the Law on Meetings and Demonstrations', which has been used to hinder the exercise of the right to peaceful assembly in Turkey due to its restrictive nature and its arbitrary application. Amnesty International calls on the authorities not to prosecute Saturday Mothers vigil participants who were simply exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

Torture and other ill-treatment is absolutely prohibited in both domestic and international law. Turkish authorities must promptly investigate the allegations of unnecessary and excessive use of force and ill-treatment committed by police officers against participants of the Saturday Mothers vigil on 25 August 2018. All those suspected of criminal responsibility must be brought to justice in fair trials.

Saturday Mothers have held 699 peaceful gatherings since May 1995. During this time, many participants have faced intimidation, harassment, excessive use of force, arbitrary detention and unjust prosecution. In 1999, the organizers decided to stop holding the weekly vigils, which resumed in 2009 to continue with their demand of truth, justice and reparations for all cases of enforced disappearance.

Amnesty International is alarmed by the statements made by the Minister of Interior on 27 August, suggesting that a ban on the weekly vigil may be imposed in the future. The relatives of those forcibly disappeared and others who had gathered to participate in the vigil on 25 August were peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, guaranteed under both domestic and international human rights law. Amnesty International calls on the authorities to ensure that the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly of everyone, including participants in the vigil, are upheld and respected during the next vigil, due to take place on 1 September and subsequently after that. Amnesty International will send observers to the vigil due to take place on Saturday 1 September.

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