

PUBLIC

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Prisoners of conscience

17 July 2003

TURKEY

Sevim Yetkiner (f), human rights defender
Baki Çelebi (m), human rights defender

Sevim Yetkiner and Baki Çelebi have been remanded to prison in Mus, southeast Turkey, to await trial. Amnesty International is concerned that they may be prisoners of conscience, detained for their activities as human rights defenders.

Sevim Yetkiner and Baki Çelebi, respectively chair and executive committee member of the Mus branch of the Human Rights Association (*Insan Haklari Dernegi* - IHD), were detained and remanded to Mus E-Type prison on 17 July, after responding to a request to report to the Anti-Terror Branch of the local police headquarters. Six other people, including two other members of the Mus Human Rights Association, were also arrested in Mus province, after responding to the same request.

They were imprisoned as the result of an 8 July decision by a court in Dogubeyazit in eastern Turkey to arrest the group *in absentia*. The decision is apparently connected with their attendance on 26 May at the funeral of Ismet Baycan, a member of the illegal armed group the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who died on 24 May in Mus E-Type prison, allegedly following severe delays in medical treatment. Although the precise charges against Sevim Yetkiner, Baki Çelebi and the six others under arrest have not been specified, it is likely that they will be tried under article 169 of the Turkish Penal Code with 'aiding and abetting an illegal organization'.

The Mus Human Rights Association have been particularly concerned about conditions in Mus E-type Prison, where there have been repeated complaints of ill-treatment, insufficient medical treatment for prisoners and harassment of their visitors.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Founded in 1986, the IHD is Turkey's largest human rights organization, and has played an important role in monitoring human rights violations and making them known to the public in Turkey. At least ten IHD members have been killed since 1991. In May 1998, the then IHD president Akin Birdal was shot and critically injured at the IHD headquarters. Amnesty International believes the Turkish authorities created the climate for this assassination by trying to link them to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Several IHD branches have also been closed on various pretexts.

Over the past eighteen months, Turkey has introduced laws with the stated aim of restricting human rights violations perpetrated by security officials. However, there has been a huge rise in the number of cases being opened against the IHD and other human rights organizations and defenders. These cases are usually opened under Law No 2908 on Associations, Article 8 of the Anti-Terror Law, or Law No 2911 on Meetings and Demonstrations. In the last two years, there have reportedly been 437 cases opened against the IHD; in the previous 14 years a total of 300 cases had been opened. While such trials usually end in acquittal, or a sentence which is suspended or commuted to a fine, Amnesty International considers that they constitute a form of judicial harassment designed to intimidate human rights defenders and restrict their activities.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- urging the authorities to guarantee the safety of prisoners of conscience Sevim Yetkiner and Baki Çelebi, calling for their immediate and unconditional release and to drop all charges against them;

- requesting that the authorities take steps to protect the IHD and its staff and to allow human rights defenders to pursue unhindered their lawful role of monitoring and reporting human rights matters in line with the UN Declaration on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders;
- calling on the authorities to take effective action to ensure all public servants recognize the legitimacy of the work of human rights defenders.

APPEALS TO:

Minister of Justice

Mr Cemil Çiçek
Ministry of Justice
Adalet Bakanligi
06659 Ankara, Turkey

Telegram: Justice Minister, Ankara, Turkey

Fax: + 90 312 418 5667

Salutation: Dear Minister

Minister of the Interior

Mr Abdulkadir Aksu
Ministry of Interior
İçişleri Bakanligi
06644 Ankara, Turkey

Telegram: Interior Minister, Ankara, Turkey

Fax: + 90 312 418 17 95

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Deputy Prime Minister and State Minister with responsibility for Human Rights

Mr Abdullah Gül,
Office of the Prime Minister,
Basbakanlik,
06573 Ankara, Turkey

Fax: +90 312 417 0476

Salutation: Dear Minister

and to diplomatic representatives of Turkey accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 28 August 2003.