

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **Turkey: Respect the right to hold peaceful Mayday assemblies**

Amnesty International notes with concern that the Turkish authorities have refused to allow demonstrations to take place in Istanbul's central Taksim Square, the traditional location for Mayday celebrations. In past years the authorities' refusal to allow Mayday demonstrations to take place has been followed by unnecessary and abusive use of force by police against peaceful demonstrators.

Amnesty International calls on the Turkish authorities to reverse this decision and to respect the rights of trade unionists and others wishing to hold peaceful assemblies on Mayday.

The large scale demonstrations planned for Mayday in Istanbul in both Taksim and Kadıköy, come nearly a year after the start of the Gezi Park protests which the authorities attempted to crush. The response of the authorities to this annual event will reveal much about the lessons the authorities have drawn from them. Amnesty International will send observers to Mayday demonstrations in Istanbul.

The current stated policy of the authorities is that large scale demonstrations will no longer be tolerated in Taksim Square or in Kadıköy, a central location on the Asian side of Istanbul and can only take place at two designated locations outside the centre of the city – in Yenikapı and Maltepe on the European and Asian sides of the city respectively. The authorities have not provided any legitimate or reasoned explanation for the refusal beyond the vague references to upholding order. Amnesty International is concerned that the policy is not in line with Turkey's international human rights law obligations to respect the right to peaceful assembly as protected by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights to which Turkey is a party.

Amnesty International notes that in recent years when the authorities have allowed Mayday rallies to take place in Taksim Square, they have passed peacefully and without injuries or damage to property. On occasions where the authorities have refused permission for Taksim Mayday rallies to take place, they have resulted in the use of abusive force by police against demonstrators, injuries and major disruption across the city.

In 2007 and 2008 there were scores of injuries after police intervened with abusive force against peaceful demonstrators. The European Court of Human Rights found the actions of authorities in forcibly dispersing demonstrators on 1 May 2008 to violate Article 11 of the European Convention of Human Rights (freedom of peaceful assembly) in the case of *Kesk and Disk vs. Turkey*. In 2009 the authorities allowed a number of Mayday demonstrators to enter Taksim Square significantly reducing the clashes experienced in the previous years. In 2010, 2011 and 2012, large-scale, peaceful, Mayday demonstrations were held without incident in Taksim Square with the approval of the authorities. In 2013 the authorities refused to allow Mayday demonstrations to go ahead in Taksim citing construction work taking place in the square. Public transport links were suspended and police used abusive force against demonstrators in areas surrounding Taksim, resulting in scores of injuries as seen in the years preceding 2009. A trial of 33 people accused of taking part in the unauthorized 2013 Mayday demonstrations continues. If convicted they face up to three years imprisonment.

Given the experience of past years and the fact that the pedestrianisation of Taksim Square has been completed it is hard to understand what legitimate aim could be pursued by banning Mayday demonstrations in the square. Conversely, the refusal appears to be based on the government's desire to prevent a visible platform for dissenting voices to express their views.

Amnesty International therefore calls on the authorities to reverse their refusal to allow Mayday demonstrations in Taksim and to respect the rights of Mayday demonstrators in line with international human rights standards. Irrespective of whether demonstrations are authorised, the authorities must ensure that unnecessary and abusive force is not used against demonstrators. If the use of force is unavoidable, for example to secure the safety of others, such force must be strictly limited to the minimum amount necessary, in compliance with UN standards for the conduct of law enforcement officials. The Turkish authorities must also ensure that nobody is detained or prosecuted for activities protected by the right to freedom of peaceful assembly.

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