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Open letter on detention of human rights defenders in Turkey

We are dismayed and appalled by the arrest and detention of ten human rights defenders by the Turkish government, now facing investigation for membership of an “armed terrorist organisation” on account of their peaceful human rights work.

As an attack on six of the most prominent human rights NGOs in the country, the arrests are a hammer blow to Turkey's besieged civil society and an ominous indicator of the direction Turkey is heading in.

The “Istanbul 10” are Veli Acu, Özlem Dalkıran, İdil Eser, Nalan Erkem, Günal Kurşun, Şeymus Özbekli, Nejat Taştan, İlknur Üstün (Turkish nationals), Ali Gharavi (Swedish national) and Peter Steudtner (German national). The arrest of İdil Eser, director of Amnesty International Turkey, follows that of the organisation’s chair Taner Kılıç a month ago – the first time that a director and chair of Amnesty International have been detained in the same country at the same time. We call on the Turkish authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all of them.

A year ago a violent coup attempt claimed 249 lives. Those killed and injured by the coup plotters deserve the utmost respect and those responsible for the violence should be brought to justice.

Nevertheless, the crackdown in the year since the failed coup attempt in Turkey has been massive and unrelenting, with more than 100,000 public sector employees dismissed, tens of thousands of people arbitrarily arrested, hundreds of journalists detained, and hundreds of media outlets and NGOs shut down.

This is part of an alarming growing worldwide trend. In 2016, people standing up peacefully for human rights were killed in at least 22 countries, and arrested or detained in 68 countries. Those who seek to close down debate and silence critical voices increasingly believe they have the upper hand.

How world leaders respond now is crucial. Although some commendably expressed concern at the G20 Summit, one-off interventions are not enough. It is time for world leaders to stand up and make a strong, determined and compelling case for human rights, dignity and justice, and the necessity of a strong and flourishing civil society as guardians of these values – both in Turkey and around the world.

Signed,

Salil Shetty, Secretary General, Amnesty International

Ricken Patel, President, Avaaz

Ken Roth, Executive Director, Human Rights Watch

Sharan Burrow, General Secretary, International Trade Union Confederation

Robin Hodess, Internal Managing Director, Transparency International