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Turkey: Authorities must immediately investigate torture allegations of student protesters

Amnesty International calls on the Turkish authorities to initiate a prompt, impartial, independent and effective investigation into the allegations of excessive use of force, torture and other ill-treatment committed by police officers against a group of high school students and graduates, following a peaceful demonstration in Istanbul on 8 June 2018. Police officers suspected of responsibility must be brought to justice in fair trials. Amnesty International also calls on the authorities not to prosecute students, who were released but remain under investigation for violating the Law on Meetings and Demonstrations. The authorities must ensure that the right to freedom of peaceful assembly of everyone, including participants in the student protest, is upheld and respected and condemn the use of torture or other ill-treatment.

Around 50 high school students and graduates gathered in Kadıköy district of Istanbul on 8 June 2018 to mark the last day of the school year and protest “the poor quality” of Turkey’s education system. The protest, which was also organized last year by several student organisations, had an overarching slogan of “Grade cards are yours, future is ours” this year.

According to eyewitnesses, around 50 uniformed and plain clothes police officers also gathered in front of the opera house in Kadıköy, where the protest was announced to take place, and prevented the students from marching. Shortly after students began shouting slogans, police intervened and finally detained 20 protesters, eight of them children as well as two photo journalists who were reporting on the protest. Video footage posted on social media shows men in plain clothes, who appear to be police officers, attacking protesters as they begin to march and before uniformed police intervene and detain protesters with the help of the same plain clothes officers.

According to eyewitnesses, the protesters’ lawyers and one protester, police officers dragged protesters on the street and handcuffed them behind their backs. The protesters’ lawyers and one protester Amnesty International spoke to also state that detained students were beaten with batons and handcuffs inside the police bus in which they were initially detained while their hands were cuffed, and with blows targeting their heads and eyes. Disturbing video footage posted on social media as from the incident, appear to show police repeatedly striking detained protesters in a police bus with batons. According to their lawyers, all detained protesters sustained bruises around their bodies while some also have head wounds and wounds on their knees. One student’s arm is reportedly severely

contused. Several video clips posted on social media and photographs Amnesty International obtained from protesters' lawyers confirm that the detainees sustained injuries. The police insulted the protesters and threatened to break their arms and legs while beating them in the police bus, where they were held for around four hours according to one of the detained protesters.

After attending the hospital, adult protesters were taken to İskele Police Station in Kadıköy, while the eight children were taken to a security directorate children's branch. All were finally released at around 4:30am on 9 June.

Lawyers told Amnesty International that after obtaining necessary medical reports, students will lodge criminal complaints against the police officers for torture.

Torture and other ill-treatment is strictly prohibited in both domestic and international law. Turkish authorities must promptly investigate the allegations of excessive use of force, torture and other ill-treatment committed by police officers against the high school students and graduates who were detained while demonstrating in Istanbul on 8 June 2018. Police officers suspected to be responsible must be brought to justice in fair trials.

Lawyers told Amnesty International that the 20 protesters and two journalists are accused of contravening the Law on Meetings and Demonstrations, which has presented a fundamental barrier to guaranteeing the right to peaceful assembly in Turkey due to its restrictive nature and its arbitrary application. At least three of the protesters are also accused of intentional injury and resisting police officers.

By participating in the protest, the high school students and graduates exercised their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, guaranteed under both domestic and international law. As such, Amnesty International also calls on the authorities not to prosecute protesters for peacefully protesting and ensure that the right to freedom of peaceful assembly of everyone, including participants in the student protest, is upheld and respected.

Similar torture and ill-treatment allegations were made by university students, who are being prosecuted for 'making propaganda for a terrorist organization' for staging a peaceful protest on 19 March against Turkey's military operation in Afrin, Syria on the campus of Istanbul's Boğaziçi University. During their statements at a court hearing on 6 June, three students told the court that they had been subjected to torture and other ill-treatment at the time of their detention and while in police custody. The students alleged that, among other things, police officers dragged students on the floor; twisted their arms and threatened to break them; banged the students' heads on the windows of the police vehicles; and kicked and punched them.

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