

EXTRA 27/99 Death threats/ Fear for safety

25 February 1999

TURKEY Osman Baydemir, President of the Diyarbakır Human Rights Association (HRA) branch (closed down)
Eren Keskin (f), President of the Istanbul HRA branch
Aban Dayanan, member of Istanbul HRA branch
Gülây Kazak (f), member of Istanbul HRA branch
Kadriye Doğan (f), member of Istanbul HRA branch
Doğan Genç, member of Istanbul HRA branch
Günay Keleş (f), member of Ankara HRA branch
and all branches of the Turkish Human Rights Association

Amnesty International is alarmed at death threats made to officials and members of the Turkish Human Rights Association (HRA) who are insisting that Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the illegal Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), should receive legal counsel and a fair trial.

Various United Nations human rights bodies, the Council of Europe, Amnesty International and several European governments have voiced similar concerns.

Branches of the HRA across the country have received many threats, mostly by telephone. On 25 February, members of the Istanbul HRA were told that "their brains would be splattered", that they had "lived their lives" and that they would "pay the price."

Some of these threats have been issued in the name of the Turkish Revenge Brigade (TIT), an ultra-nationalist group implicated in the assassination attempt last year on Akın Birdal, President of the HRA.

Women working for the HRA in Ankara have also been threatened and sexually insulted. It is believed that, as the threats have been directed at named individuals, the police may be responsible, since HRA members are well-known to them rather than to the general public. Eren Keskin, lawyer and president of the Istanbul HRA, was reportedly threatened by a plainclothes police officer in Istanbul State Security Court on 19 February.

Media and government have stated their offence at the suggestion that Abdullah Öcalan may not receive a fair trial and on 24 February a warrant to search the Istanbul branch of the HRA was issued by Istanbul State Security Court.

Abdullah Öcalan has been remanded in prison on charges of treason on the island of İmralı in the Sea of Marmara.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Immediate worldwide condemnation followed the assassination attempt last year on Akın Birdal, and much speculation about the role of the Turkish state in the attack. Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz, on the other hand, reportedly made an unfounded and ill-intentioned claim that the attack was "...an internal settling of accounts, like a misunderstanding between those in the same camp... It is clear they [the HRA] were connected to the PKK". In fact, inquiries led police shortly afterwards to TIT. Sixteen alleged members or supporters of the group, including a retired army major, a serving gendarmerie officer and the two men thought to have carried out the shooting, are currently on trial accused of "attempted murder" and of "forming an armed gang to commit crime for social and political objectives". They face possible prison sentences of up to 24 years.

In Amnesty International's view the Turkish authorities created the climate for the shooting of Akyn Birdal through persistent attempts to discredit the HRA and falsely associate it with the PKK. Most dangerous was the authorities' irresponsible handling of purported confessions by _emdin Sak_k, a disenchanted former military commander of the PKK. In late April 1998 the Turkish press gave enormous publicity to uncorroborated statements attributed to _emdin Sak_k, which he has since denied making, that a number of prominent personalities critical of the government were active PKK supporters. Akyn Birdal was one of the targets of these accusations.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:

- expressing grave concern at the reported death threats against officials, members and branches of the Turkish Human Rights Association;
- appealing that all necessary steps be taken to ensure the physical safety of the HRA officials, members and premises currently under threat;
- urging the authorities to issue a public statement recognizing the vital role of non-governmental organizations such as the Human Rights Association in creating a healthy civil society, as outlined in the UN Human Rights Defenders Resolution of 9 December 1998.

APPEALS TO:

President Süleyman Demirel
Office of the President
Cumhurba_kanl____
06100 Ankara, Turkey

Telegrams: President, Ankara, Turkey

Faxes:+ 90 312 468 5026

Telexes: 42303 kosk tr

Salutation: Your Excellency

Prime Minister
Mr Bülent Ecevit
Office of the Prime Minister
Ba_bakanl_k
06573 Ankara, Turkey

Telegrams: Prime Minister, Ankara, Turkey

Faxes:+ 90 312 417 0476

Salutation:Dear Prime Minister

Justice Minister
Prof Selçuk Öztekin
Ministry of Justice
Adalet Bakanl____
06659 Ankara, Turkey

Telegrams: Justice Minister, Ankara, Turkey

Faxes:+ 90 312 417 3954 / 418 5667

Salutation:Dear Minister

COPIES 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 25 March 1999.