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Turkey: Irresponsibility of authorities leads to armed attack on President of Human Rights Association

By persistently attempting to discredit the Turkish Human Rights Association (HRA), the Turkish authorities created the climate for today's shooting of Ak_n Birdal, President of the HRA, Amnesty International said today.

“The Turkish authorities have consistently failed to investigate or condemn earlier fatal attacks on officials of the Association,” the organization said.

“In fact, successive Turkish governments have remained mute when such attacks took place, while the Foreign Ministry endeavoured to take every opportunity to undermine the HRA -- and Ak_n Birdal in particular. It appears that this may have been official policy.”

Two unidentified assailants burst into the offices of the Association in Akara this morning and opened fire on Mr Birdal. He suffered six bullet wounds and is in a critical condition in hospital.

It appears that this unprovoked attack is the result of the Turkish authorities' irresponsible handling of alleged confessions by _emdin Sak_k, a former military commander of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) who recently defected to the Kurdish Democratic Party/Iraq (KDP/Iraq) of Masoud Barzani, and was subsequently abducted by the Turkish security forces in Northern Iraq and brought back across the border. The Turkish press then published confessions alleged to have been made by _emdin Sak_k, in which numerous prominent personalities critical of the government were implicated as having actively supported the PKK. Ak_n Birdal was one of the targets of such accusations.

More than 10 officials of the HRA have been killed since 1991. In most cases, the assailants were unidentified, although the attacks took place at the same time as intense police harassment, coinciding with a succession of prosecutions of the organization for its legitimate activities. Muhsin Melik, founder of the _anl_urfa branch of the HRA, was able to identify his attackers as police officers before he died of his wounds on 2 June 1994.

“It appears that such murders of HRA members were not properly investigated, and in no cases was the HRA satisfied that the true perpetrators had been arrested -- indeed, it appeared that perpetrators were being protected,” Amnesty International said.

The text of what was apparently a secret Interior Ministry circular in January 1997 referred to human rights groups as being used by the PKK, and recommended that local Governors, Gendarmerie General Command and Police Headquarters should *“take measures to*

eliminate the impression of credibility” of people who *“incite the public”*. The uncorroborated allegations attributed to _emdin Sak_k were given enormous publicity -- in direct breach of the normal practice of public prosecutors who have the right to keep preliminary investigation secret.

The bitter conflict between government forces and the PKK in southeast Turkey has claimed more than 28,000 lives since 1984. In this highly-charged context, government silence in the face of such gross allegations was irresponsible and has given licence to the attackers.

“It is time that the Turkish Government, at its highest levels, condemns such attacks. It should publicly acknowledge the important contribution made by the HRA and other human rights organizations, and ensure that the perpetrators of this attack are apprehended and brought to justice,” Amnesty International said.

In February this year an Amnesty International delegate observed a hearing at Ankara State Security Court in one of the many prosecutions faced by Ak_n Birdal for exercising his right to freedom of expression.
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