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Amnesty International urges Turkish authorities to end Ocalan solitary confinement

Amnesty International wrote today to the Turkish Prime Minister, on the first anniversary of Abdullah Ocalan's death sentence, to raise concern over his solitary confinement in a prison on the Turkish island of Imrali.

Abdullah Ocalan leader of the armed opposition group Kurdistan Workers' Party has been held in solitary confinement for 16 months since his apprehension on 15 February 1999. The human rights organization is concerned that this may constitute cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. It understands that his lawyers' recent application for him to be transferred to another prison has been rejected.

Amnesty International has been informed by Abdullah Ocalan's lawyers that he is kept in a 13 square metre cell with toilet and shower in the same room. He is reportedly allowed outside for one hour twice a day into an area measuring 40 square metres. This area is surrounded by very high walls and is covered at the top with wire netting. He is under continuous observation by the prison guards, with video cameras both inside and outside his cell.

He is reportedly permitted to meet his lawyers once a week for one hour and his immediate family once a month for one hour, despite the fact that according to the law he is entitled to see his relatives for one hour a week. He is allowed limited access to newspapers and magazines, has a radio access to the official radio station only, and no television. Most of the books brought to him by his lawyers are given to

him, but according to Amnesty International's information very few of the letters and cards sent to him are given to him.

Amnesty International believes that prolonged solitary confinement may have serious effects on the physical and mental health of prisoners.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee, in its General Comment No. 20 (44), paragraph 6, has made clear that prolonged solitary confinement of the detained or imprisoned person may amount to acts prohibited under Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), that is, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or even torture.

Turkey has not yet signed the ICCPR, but is party to the European Convention on Human Rights which in Article 3 prohibits torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. In 1997 the UN Committee against Torture recommended that "Except in exceptional circumstances, inter alia, when the safety of persons or property is involved, the use of solitary confinement be abolished, particularly during pre-trial detention, or at least that it should be strictly and specifically regulated by law (maximum duration, etc.) and that judicial supervision should be introduced."

A delegation of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) which visited Abdullah Ocalan on 2 March 1999 stated that "additional measures are required to counter the potentially negative effects on Mr Ocalan's mental health of being held on his own in a remote location under a high security regime. Those measures relate... to his possibilities for contact with the outside world and the precise nature of the regime applied to him... should gradually be rendered less restrictive."

The CPT stressed that prisoners who present a particularly high security risk should, within the confines of their special unit, enjoy a relaxed regime (able to mix freely with fellow prisoners in the unit; allowed to move without restriction within what is likely to be a relatively small physical space, granted a good deal of choice about activities, etc.) by way of compensation for their severe custodial situation. Since February 1999 there have been no other prisoners on the island with whom Abdullah Ocalan can associate.

"We urge the Turkish authorities to ensure that all possible steps are taken to provide Abdullah Ocalan with social contact with other prisoners and that other measures are taken to alleviate the possible adverse physical and psychological effects of prolonged solitary confinement." Amnesty International said.

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