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Turkey: Öcalan's lawyers beaten by police

Lawyers representing Abdullah Öcalan should be allowed to carry out their work without fearing for their safety, Amnesty International said today following reports that the Kurdish leader's defence lawyers were beaten by police during and after today's hearing in Ankara.

"This very disturbing incident illustrates the climate of intimidation in which Öcalan's lawyers are forced to work," the organization added.

"The harassment and threats to Öcalan's lawyers are not being adequately investigated, thus creating an atmosphere of impunity."

Amnesty International is calling on the Turkish authorities to open a thorough and independent investigation into the lawyers' beating and to publicly express their support for the principle of the right to defence.

The organization is also urging the Turkish authorities to uphold the principle, set out in the United Nations Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, that "lawyers shall not be identified with their clients or their clients' causes as a result of discharging their functions".

An Amnesty International representative present at today's session of the trial learnt that somebody cried out "They are beating up a lawyer". When the families of killed soldiers attending the session as plaintiffs applauded the news, the judge simply warned them to calm down and did not order an immediate investigation of the incident.

At the end of the session, the Amnesty International representative witnessed stones and metal objects -- among other things -- being thrown at the defence lawyers, who subsequently had to leave the courtroom through a police cordon.

According to reports, lawyers Niyazi Bulgan and İrfan Dünder were beaten by uniformed policemen inside the court's premises. After being taken to the police station adjoining the court, all the defence lawyers were transferred to the market place of Yenişehir where they were beaten and kicked by the police. During the transfer police officers reportedly threatened them saying: "We will kill you". The police officers also reportedly tried to incite people on the market place shouting: "These are Apo's lawyers", but only few of the passers-by participated in the attacks.

As a result of these attacks, lawyers Derya Bayir, Mükriime Tepe (both female), Ahmet Avşar, Niyazi Bulgan and İrfan Dünder were injured, the latter two seriously, and received medical treatment.

Background

Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), was arrested in Kenya on 15 February and taken back to Turkey. He was only granted access to his lawyers 10 days after his arrest. On 26 February Amnesty International condemned the persecution of lawyers representing him. Ahmet Zeki Okçuoğlu and Hatice Korkut, who visited him on 25 February, were kicked and punched as they arrived at the quay-side at Mürşane to set off for the prison island of İmralı, where Abdullah Öcalan is being held. Both lawyers and their families have received telephone threats.

Another alarming episode involved four lawyers working on Abdullah Öcalan's case who held a press conference at the Press Museum in the Çarşamba district of Istanbul a day later. They were jostled by an angry crowd on entering the museum and one of them, Osman Baydemir, was arrested for one day in connection with a statement he had made some weeks before. After the press conference, the lawyers were unwilling to leave the building as there was a group of people shouting right-wing slogans and threats outside. After initially declining to offer any guarantees for the lawyers' safety, the police eventually brought a vehicle to the museum and accompanied them to relative safety.

After the last session in the same trial of Abdullah Öcalan on 24 March 1999, the lawyers had to leave the court through a window, because they were threatened by an angry crowd.

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