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Turkey: Release of two policemen convicted of the death of six demonstrators

The release of two Turkish policemen convicted of killing six demonstrators in Istanbul five years ago raises serious concerns about accountability and impunity in the Turkish security forces and continues the tradition of protecting the perpetrator and not the victim, Amnesty International said today.

A Turkish penal court released the two policemen on Friday 3 March, after sentencing them to long prison terms and acquitted 18 others in the trial of the deaths of nine demonstrators, and the injury of five people in Istanbul's Gaziosmanpaşa district in March 1995.

One of the defendant policemen Adem Albayrak, received four sentences of 24 years each for causing the deaths of four demonstrators, and another, Mehmet Gündoğan, was sentenced to two sentences of 24 years each for causing the deaths of two demonstrators.

However the judge reduced their sentences to a few years on the grounds that the policemen had voluntarily handed themselves in, their conduct during the hearings and that the dead demonstrators had broken the law. The two would not have to serve their sentences because of the time they had already spent in prison.

The court only barred the two policemen for a few months from public service. The remaining defendants were acquitted for lack of evidence.

Video footage of the incident had shown that police were under attack from demonstrators throwing sticks, stones and other objects and that both police and civilians were injured by demonstrators. Video footage also clearly shows that police were shooting the demonstrators with live ammunition. The demonstrators who were killed died of gunshots, apparently fired by the police.

Amnesty International has pointed out that even where complaints of serious human rights violations are pursued by the authorities and prosecution of security officers is actually brought about, only a negligible proportion of them are eventually convicted.

According to recent official figures, investigations of 577 security officials accused of torture between 1995 and 1999 resulted in only 10 convictions (1.7 %). In the same period, 2851 investigations into cases of ill-treatment ended with 84 convictions (2.9 %). In cases where a conviction occurs, security forces officers are often favoured by the lightest possible sentences.

The punishment should be commensurate with the gravity of the crime and sufficient to deter police from committing human rights violations. Police or gendarmes convicted of ill-treatment, torture, "disappearance" or extrajudicial executions should be dismissed from the force, Amnesty International urged .

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