

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Turkey: Sexual violence against women in detention must be eradicated**

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(Istanbul) Women in custody in Turkey risk being subjected to sexual violence by members of the state security forces, Amnesty International warned today as it released the report [Turkey: End sexual violence against women in custody!](#)

The report details how women from all social and cultural backgrounds are subjected to abuse, assault and rape in detention. Some sectors of women are particularly at risk, especially women of Kurdish origin from the south-east and women who hold political beliefs unacceptable to the authorities or military.

Amnesty International cautioned against an increase in such abuses, should a state of emergency be imposed because of a conflict in Iraq. Given that a number of these violations against women were committed during a previous state of emergency, the organization warned that these powers should not be abused at the expense of women.

"It would be a great shame if Turkey's human rights were to suffer because of a conflict elsewhere," Amnesty International said.

"A lot of the events detailed in this report occurred during a period of state of emergency. Should a state of emergency be imposed because of a conflict in Iraq, we would certainly hope that the authorities would do all they can to ensure that these powers are not abused at the expense of women."

The report is based on research conducted throughout 2002, including visits to Turkey in June and September 2002. Since the report was concluded, a new government has taken power in Turkey.

"The findings of this report present a challenge to the government to make their statements of commitment to human rights a reality," Amnesty International said.

"The new government does not have to carry the baggage of the previous government, instead it should take concrete steps to overcome the problem of sexual violence against women."

In Turkey, it continues to be extremely difficult for women who have experienced sexual violence to

speak out and obtain justice. Ostracism, discrimination by society and concepts of "honour" conspire to silence the survivors of sexual violence. When agents of the state are the perpetrators, they reinforcing a culture of violence and discrimination that places all women at risk.

Amnesty International is concerned that state agents may be resorting to torture in the form of **rape** and **sexual assault** in the knowledge that survivors are unlikely to want to report their experiences.

"The perpetrators have been effectively targeting both the survivor and her community, while also committing their crimes with impunity," Amnesty International said.

Reports received by Amnesty International indicate that women detained are frequently **stripped naked** by male officers during questioning in police custody or in prison. In this situation women are at high risk of exposure to violence and humiliation.

In Turkey, women face forced "**virginity tests**" as a form of punishment or humiliation. The consequences of "virginity testing" for many women examined, whose hymens have been reported to be absent, have included violence, humiliation, and on occasion, death. Merely the threat of a test can be sufficient to cause psychological consequences for the victim of sexual assault. To refuse can be perceived as an admission of "stained honour" and may put the survivor at increased risk of sexual assault.

Sometimes a woman is subjected to sexual violence in the presence of her husband or family members, apparently as a means of forcing her husband or family member to "confess", or in a cynical utilization of the concept of "honour", as a way of demeaning her family and her community.

In interviews with over 100 female prisoners in Diyarbakir, Mus, Mardin, Batman and Midyat, the Diyarbakir Bar Women's Commission established that nearly all of the women had been subjected to "virginity testing", and nearly all had experienced some form of sexual abuse, either verbal or physical, whilst in police custody.

"Rape and sexual assault are compounded by the authorities' failure to provide redress and protection," Amnesty International said.

Women surviving sexual violence often have their experiences compounded by being ostracized. Other women have been forced to flee their homes, with or without their families. Many women often do not disclose sexual assault because they believe that reporting it will not result in the perpetrators being punished.

In fact, women who speak out against sexual violence by agents of the state are at risk of further abuse. Women who have spoken out about their ordeal have been subjected to legal action, threats and imprisonment. Lawyers representing women who have been sexually assaulted in custody have in turn been subjected to official, media and peer persecution.

Access to redress has been particularly difficult when perpetrators of sexual violence have been state actors, both because of the scarcity of prosecutions and because the law on the prosecution of state officials means that individuals who are able to take advantage of the statute of limitations are more likely to be state officials than other individuals facing criminal charges. At present, individuals cannot be sentenced for crimes after a specified period of time has passed from the date of the crime.

"Lengthy delays in court proceedings do not just delay justice -- they contribute to perpetrators not being brought to justice at all," Amnesty International said.

Discrimination against women and the sexual assault of women are linked. When individuals representing the state express discriminatory attitudes, this not only falls far short of upholding women's rights, but Amnesty International is concerned that it may contribute to perpetuating a culture of violence

against all women.

"When agents of the state perpetrate violence against women it sends a clear message condoning such acts of violence in all spheres -- be they official, in the family, or by the individual -- and places all women at risk."

"This situation cannot remain unchecked."

Amnesty International called on the Turkish government to undertake widespread reforms to end sexual violence against women, including:

- ending the blindfolding and stripping of detainees during questioning;
- ending the strip-searching of female detainees by male officials. End blindfolding in police custody;
- bringing those responsible for human rights violations, including those who order them, to justice.

**For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact Judit Arenas on + 44 7778 472 188.**

Public Document

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566  
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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