

AI INDEX: EUR 44/55/99

27 August 1999

PUBLIC STATEMENT

TURKEY

Evidence of persecution of conscripts on the increase

Reports of persecution and deaths in suspicious circumstances of young men carrying out their military service in the Turkish army are on the increase, Amnesty International said today, giving rise to concern about ill-treatment in the armed forces.

Many of these reports relate to individuals whose families originate from the predominantly Kurdish southeastern provinces of Turkey.

Amnesty International is also concerned about the situation of numerous Turkish citizens of Kurdish origin who have left Turkey to avoid military service because they say they do not wish to fight their own people and are seeking political asylum abroad.

Süleyman Aksoy, aged 24, whose family is originally from Malatya, had managed to leave Turkey in 1995 in order to avoid doing military service. However, he was returned to Turkey by the authorities in the Netherlands. On his return he was reportedly detained for questioning for two days at Istanbul Airport and during this detention he was reportedly beaten.

As a draft evader he was sent immediately to Etimesgut in Ankara to do his military service. After two months, he went on leave to see his family before being sent to Gülhane Military Medical Academy for the remainder of his military service. Less than a week later, on 12 July 1999, his family were told that he had committed suicide.

The family have stated that they knew no reason for Süleyman to commit suicide and that they believe his death to be suspicious. Although they were expressly forbidden in writing by the Military Medical Academy command from opening his coffin, they did so and reported that the body was unrecognizable.

Amnesty International has written to the Turkish authorities on a number of occasions about similar incidents. On 31 July 1998, Amnesty International wrote to the then Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz asking for an investigation into three earlier deaths:

Hüseyin Baykara, from Adıyaman province, reportedly hanged himself at his military unit in Tekirdağ province. His body was handed over to his family on 9 June 1998.

Zeki İmen, from Bitlis province, who was carrying out his military service in Diyarbakır province, was reportedly known to be opposed to the conflict in the southeast and was therefore not given a weapon. On 21 November 1997, his family was contacted to collect his body, which reportedly bore three bullet wounds. The family were given contradictory reasons for his death, one officer stating that he had committed suicide and another claiming that he had been killed in an armed clash.

Hasan Yeşilova, from Gaziantep, died on 14 May 1998 while doing military service in Ağrı province. He reportedly told his family the day before he died that he and two others had been beaten on the back

of the neck with a rifle butt and subjected to *falaka* because they had refused to carry out the orders of an officer.

It is not uncommon for Turkish citizens of Kurdish origin to be reluctant or unwilling to do their military service because they do not wish to participate in the conflict in the southeast of Turkey. A number of such individuals have gone so far as to leave Turkey in order to avoid conscription into the armed forces.

Amnesty International recognizes that while these individuals may not be unconditionally opposed to all service in the armed forces, they are exercising a genuine right of selective conscientious objection on political grounds to military service under the circumstances presently existing in Turkey.

The human rights organization has previously expressed its concern about the lack of access to any alternative service to military service for conscientious objectors in Turkey and has urged the Turkish authorities to bring the country's legislation into line with international standards.

Traditionally, young men called up for military service in Turkey were deliberately sent to another area of the country away from their native region, but in recent years many Kurdish families have migrated from the southeast to metropolitan areas of western Turkey, with the result that a conscript of Kurdish origin might well be sent to do his military service in the southeast part of the country from which his family originated and where he probably still has relations.

Background

For the past 15 years the security forces have been engaged in a bitter and bloody conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The conflict has claimed an estimated 31,000 lives. Both parties to the conflict have been responsible for many civilian deaths in violation of international standards.

Conscripts sent to do their military service in the southeast may well be required to serve at least part of the time in the gendarmerie. The gendarmerie has played an active role in the policy of village evacuations. It is estimated that some 3,000 settlements were evacuated or burned in the course of the conflict in the southeast. Amnesty International continues to receive credible reports of burnings of villages and crops. An estimated three million people have been internally displaced.

Amnesty International has documented in the past and continues to receive frequent and distressing reports of individual and mass detentions in the southeast. Reports of such detentions, which are usually carried out by soldiers attached to local gendarmerie commands, are all too frequently accompanied by shocking allegations of torture.

For example, in June 1999, Amnesty International received reports that about 50 people from villages in Kahraman Mara_ province were taken into detention at Pazarc_k Gendarmerie Command and reportedly severely beaten and tortured. This included being forced to eat human excrement, suspended by their arms which were tied behind their backs, truncheoned and sprayed with pressurized water.

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