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TURKEY: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL APPEALS FOR URGENT STEPS TO RESOLVE HUNGER STRIKE BEFORE PRISONERS DIE

As 161 prisoners in 16 Turkish prisons have passed the 50th day of their hunger strike, Amnesty International urgently calls on the Turkish Government to take steps to resolve the hunger strike before the prisoners die.

“The Justice Minister Evket Kazan and certain prison authorities have taken positive, although limited, steps which have resulted in the end of hunger strikes in some prisons, but 36 prisoners are now close to death and at risk of permanent physical damage. Ministerial action today could save lives,” Amnesty International said.

The prisoners’ list of demands includes three issues which are of concern to Amnesty International.

Firstly, that remand prisoners should not be transferred to distant prisons during the course of their trials (in Turkey, trials generally last for well over a year in a series of monthly hearings). The prisoners justifiably claim that such transfers -- currently insisted upon by the Justice Ministry -- would interfere with their right to a fair trial, since lawyers would have difficulty travelling to meet their clients to prepare a defence. The prisoners, on the other hand, would appear in court after travelling in closed vehicles, in sometimes intense heat or freezing cold, for more than 10 hours.

Two other demands raised by the prisoners relate to issues on which Amnesty International has addressed the Turkish Government on many occasions in recent years: an end to ill-treatment and obstruction of medical treatment.

Prisoners accused of crimes under the Anti-Terror Law frequently report that the gendarmes and police guarding them take the opportunity to “punish” them. Amnesty International has received medical evidence and the testimony of witnesses which strongly corroborates these reports. Gendarmes and police brought into prisons to quell protests have severely beaten prisoners, sometimes with fatal results. For example, three prisoners were beaten to death at Buca Prison in Izmir in September 1995, and four prisoners died of beatings at Ümraniye Prison in Istanbul in January 1996.

Amnesty International has repeatedly appealed to successive Turkish Governments to ensure that prisoners should be managed by prison staff under the authority of the Justice Ministry and not be brought into contact with police and gendarmes.

In recent years, Amnesty International has raised several cases of apparent medical neglect of prisoners with Health Ministers and prison authorities, and is currently in possession of detailed medical evidence that 15 prisoners in Istanbul prisons are effectively being denied necessary medical treatment. The health problems include asthma, heart disease, diabetes, trauma from beatings, and injuries as a consequence of torture. Again the problem is with gendarmes who are failing, apparently intentionally, to take prisoners for hospital appointments.

Once a prisoner is formally arrested by a court they pass from the authority of the Interior Ministry (responsible for police and gendarmerie) into that of the Justice Ministry (responsible for prison service). Amnesty International repeats its call that the Justice Ministry be given sufficient resources to ensure that there is no need to call upon Interior Ministry security forces to handle prison business.

A commitment by the Justice Minister to take effective steps to ensure that prison business is handled by Justice Ministry staff and not by soldiers or police could help to bring to an end the hunger strike, and what is more important, would demonstrate serious commitment to meet international standards in the management of Turkey's prisons.

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