

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: EUR 44/008/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 032
13 February 2004

Turkey: Prime Minister Erdogan must convert his political promise of human rights into reality

(Istanbul) At the end of Amnesty International's high level visit to Turkey, Secretary General Irene Khan concluded: "Turkey is burdened by a history of human rights violations -- many thousands have suffered severe abuse. Prime Minister Erdogan was himself a victim of the repression of the time. This government must rise to the challenge of ending the burden of impunity for past abuse and continuing violations, and make human rights a reality for people in Turkey and not simply a political promise. Some progress has been made, but much more remains to be done if the Turkish government is to meet its international obligations as well as its people's expectations."

"The Prime Minister is critical of the double standards of European governments, and what he believes to be the bias of international non-governmental organizations, but none of this should be used as an excuse to escape confronting the reality of Turkey's human rights."

During the visit, Amnesty International met with senior officials including Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, and Minister of Interior Abdulkadir Aksu, and had frank and constructive discussions. The government accepted Amnesty International's assessment that while some progress had been made, more needs to be done. The organization was assured by the government that its recommendations and concerns are being taken seriously.

The Minister of Justice did not meet with Amnesty International, but the organization met with the Presidents of the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court, and the Council of State. They acknowledged the need for major judicial reform.

"The judiciary is independent on paper, but measures need to be taken to make it both independent and effective in practice," Ms Khan stated.

Ms Khan stated that in government meetings, the Amnesty International delegation heard very constructive and positive statements regarding the role of human rights and civil society groups in and outside Turkey. "But this is not enough. Those at the highest levels of government have a responsibility to acknowledge -- in public statements and not only in private meetings -- the valuable contribution made by human rights activists in Turkey and abroad. Negative public statements contribute to the continuing hostility and suspicion towards human rights defenders in Turkey by state officials."

"Protection of human rights defenders is not just an issue of legislative reform but of changing attitudes, which needs the clear public support of political leaders."

The delegation met with a wide range of Turkish non-governmental organizations. Despite the government's legal reforms, many of them continue to face hostility and harassment from state officials. They all called for greater recognition for their legitimate role as civil society monitors of the government's promises.

At the end of Amnesty International's visit, the organization's assessment is that for the human rights situation in Turkey to continue to improve, the government must:

- carry out a fundamental reform of state institutions, particularly the security, law enforcement and judicial systems;
- introduce further radical legislative reform;
- protect and ensure full participation of civil society, including human rights defenders, in the reform process.

"As an internationally recognised organisation that was awarded the 1977 Nobel Peace prize for its independent and impartial work on human rights, Amnesty International has a long history of credible work on Turkey. We have taken the government's reform agenda and their proposals for implementation very seriously. We have made a serious assessment of the current state of human rights in Turkey and have conveyed to the government our recommendations," Ms Khan added.

In his meeting with the Secretary General, the Prime Minister stated that the government "...will assess the recommendations in this memorandum and take them as constructive suggestions and look into them ... such previous recommendations helped us on the reform process in 2003."

Recognizing that Turkey is going through a period of transition in which different pro- and anti-reform forces are at play, Ms Khan stated: "Human rights should not be made a political football by the government either in Turkey's bilateral relations with Europe or in its domestic policy. The people of Turkey deserve better."

"The Prime Minister's focus should be to build the willingness, ability and capacity of his government to make human rights real for the people."

Background

An Amnesty International delegation lead by the Secretary General Irene Khan visited Turkey from 8 to 13 February to meet with representatives of civil society and the Turkish government. The delegation discussed with the government a written memorandum addressed to the Turkish Prime Minister: *From Paper to Practice: Making Change Real* (AI Index: EUR 44/001/2004). At the end of the mission the delegation published a report outlining its concerns regarding the situation of human rights defenders: *Restrictive Laws, Arbitrary Practice -- The Pressure on Human Rights Defenders* (AI Index: EUR 44/002/2004).

Amnesty International took up the case of Recep Tayyip Erdogan as a prisoner of conscience following his sentence in 1998 under Article 312/2 of the Turkish Penal Code for reciting a poem by Ziya Gokalp. Amnesty International members from around the world lobbied for his immediate and unconditional release and for abolition and reform of laws restricting freedom of expression in Turkey. Appeals from Amnesty International were addressed to the then President, Prime Minister, Ministers of Justice and Interior and to the President of the Turkish Parliament.

For more information, or to arrange an interview, please contact:

In Turkey: Özlem Dalkiran on mobile +90 532 236 5025

Judit Arenas on mobile + 44 7778 472 188

In London: Teresa Richardson on +44 207 413 5554 or mobile +44 7768 182 445

Public Document

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>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>