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TURKEY: PROMISED DEMOCRACY PACKAGE CANNOT BE VIEWED AS A SERIOUS REFORM INITIATIVE

Turkey's promised democracy package will result in the welcome release of prisoners, but it cannot be viewed as a serious reform initiative, Amnesty International said today.

According to the human rights organization, the planned reforms -- referred to by Prime Minister Tansu Ciller as the "Democracy Package" -- contain not one single measure towards tackling Turkey's fundamental human rights problems: widespread and systematic torture, extrajudicial execution, and the growing number of "disappearances" in custody.

In a letter sent to the Turkish Prime Minister, Amnesty International says it has followed with great interest the discussions in parliament about the Democracy Package, comprising the abolition of Article 8 of the Anti-Terror Law -- which punishes "separatist propaganda" with up to five years' imprisonment -- and changes to the Turkish Constitution.

The human rights organization adds that it welcomes the proposed abolition of Article 8, since it will result in the release of over 100 prisoners -- most of them journalists and many of whom are clearly prisoners of conscience. However, under the planned reforms, the offence of "separatist propaganda" will be moved to Article 311 of the Turkish Penal Code.

"It is difficult to believe in the sincerity of a democracy package which permits Turkish citizens to be imprisoned for the expression of their non-violent opinions, exposed to secret detention and brutality in police stations, or abducted by plainclothes policemen, never to be seen again. It is difficult not to believe that the package was designed principally in order to deflect international and domestic criticism of a worsening human rights record," Amnesty International says.

The organization called for the scope of the democracy package to be expanded, so that it unambiguously removes those articles of Turkish law which have resulted in the jailing of prisoners of conscience, and provides basic safeguards for Turkish citizens against torture, extrajudicial execution and "disappearance". Only then would the reforms mark a new era for human rights in Turkey.  
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