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Turkey: Police officer convicted for killing Gezi Park protestor

Police officer Ahmet Şahbaz was convicted on 3 September by an Ankara court for the killing of Gezi Park protestor, Ethem Sarısülük following a trial beset by delays and procedural irregularities. It is the first conviction following four deaths caused by abusive police force during the protests that swept Turkey during the summer of 2013, trials continue regarding two other deaths while an investigation has yet to be concluded in the fourth.

The riot police officer, who shot Ethem Sarısülük was convicted of intentional killing by the Ankara Heavy Penal Court No. 6. The life sentence was commuted to seven years and nine months following reductions. A lawyer representing Ethem Sarısülük's family condemned the lenience of the sentence and vowed to launch an appeal.

Ethem Sarısülük was shot in the head with live ammunition on 1 June 2013 during a demonstration in support of the Gezi Park protests that began in the days before in Istanbul and spread across the country in the weeks that followed. Sarısülük died as a result of his injuries on 14 June 2013.

The conviction comes despite a number of flaws during the investigation and trial phase. Prosecutors waited a week before conducting a crime scene investigation and two weeks before questioning the police officer responsible for the shooting, despite his identity never being in doubt. After a prosecution was opened, the court attempted to halt the trial on the grounds that permission had not been granted by the authorities to try an official for an act committed in the course of his duties; then, it made an unlawful attempt not to try the case following accusations of bias levelled at it by Sarısülük family lawyers.

The initial charge of 'causing death by exceeding the limits of legitimate defence' was only increased to 'possible intentional killing under unfair provocation' charge during the trial, as a result of the overwhelming evidence including video footage from different angles of the moments surrounding the shooting presented at court by the Sarısülük family lawyers.

In its verdict, the court ruled that police officer Ahmet Şahbaz had been 'intensely' provoked by protestors who were throwing stones at the police.

In the vast majority of complaints of abusive police force by police, cases have not even come to trial. More than a year after the protests swept Turkey, criminal investigations have been closed without result or remain stalled without significant progress in identifying the perpetrators.

The impunity enjoyed by police officers who used arbitrary and abusive force in violation of international human rights standards, represents a damning indictment of the authorities' failure to acknowledge and learn from the abusive policies applied during the Gezi Park protests.

The trial into the killing of Ethem Sarısülük was one of only three trials of police officers alleged to have killed protestors during last year's Gezi Park protests. The risk of impunity for the very serious human rights abuses committed by law enforcement officials during the protests that led to the deaths of three others and injuries to countless others remains.

Accountability for the many abuses committed during the Gezi Park protests cannot be achieved through the conviction of a solitary officer. Turkish authorities must bring swift and just conclusion to the many hundreds of complaints that are still pending.

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