

URGENT ACTION

END PROTEST BAN ON GALATASARAY SQUARE

Saturday Mothers/People, a group of relatives of victims of enforced disappearances and other human rights defenders are prevented from exercising their right to freedom of peaceful assembly in Istanbul's Galatasaray Square every Saturday, a place of symbolic importance to the group. In recent weeks, riot police have again used unnecessary force during detention of the rights defenders and widened their security perimeter preventing independent observation by journalists and civil society organisations.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL USING THIS MODEL LETTER

Minister of Interior

Ali Yerlikaya

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Ankara/Türkiye

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Dear Minister,

I am writing to call on you to ensure that **Saturday Mothers/People** who have been denied their right to freedom of peaceful assembly in Galatasaray Square in Istanbul since August 2018 are allowed to hold their weekly vigil free from police excessive use of force and without fear of arrest and detention.

Since 8 April 2023, Saturday Mothers/People have been trying to return to Galatasaray Square every Saturday, in line with two Constitutional Court rulings in November 2022 and March 2023. The rulings found that the two applicants Maside Ocak and Gülseren Yoleri's right to freedom of peaceful assembly had been violated and that the 'Beyoğlu district governorate should be informed (...) to prevent a recurrence of the violation'. Yet the Square remains under constant police blockade, every Saturday, with those wishing to hold their, short peaceful vigil are detained by police before they even reach the Square and journalists and civil society organizations are prevented from observing the police intervention.

Routinely, police officers use excessive and arbitrary force to disperse peaceful protesters, with the apparent intent of inflicting pain and punishment on the participants of the vigils. Most recently on Saturday 14 October, police detained Besna and Ali Tosun, reverse handcuffing them with several cable ties. Both were later released. Observers from civil society organizations have documented similar instances of unwarranted use of force that may amount to torture and other ill-treatment and lawyers have made criminal complaints which, to date, have not been effectively investigated.

The repeated arbitrary arrests and detention of the Saturday Mothers/People each week is a new violation of their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly under Türkiye's Constitution, as established in the Maside Ocak (No. 2019/21721) and Gülseren Yoleri (No. 2020/7092) rulings, and Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Articles 19 and 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which Türkiye is a party to. These arbitrary arrests and detention are also a violation of the right to liberty and security of person, which is protected by Article 9 of the ICCPR.

I urge you to use your authority to ensure that police allow Saturday Mothers/People and other peaceful protesters to gather on Galatasaray Square. Police should protect peaceful protestors so that they can exercise their right to freedom of peaceful assembly without fear of being subject to excessive use of force, arbitrary arrest and detention. I also urge you to order the Beyoğlu governor to lift the ban and refrain from imposing new bans on assemblies in Galatasaray Square, in line with the above-mentioned rulings of the Constitutional Court.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For the past 28 years, the Saturday Mothers/People have tirelessly sought truth and justice for their loved ones who were forcibly disappeared in police custody in the 1980s and 1990s. Saturday Mothers/People began holding a peaceful weekly vigil in Galatasaray Square in central Istanbul in May 1995 demanding that the authorities account for the fate of their loved ones. Despite being arbitrarily arrested and detained every week, they continued to gather in the square until March 1999 when they faced heavy-handed police repression with the aim to prevent the peaceful protests from taking place. After a gap of ten years and because there was no progress in their quest for truth and justice for their disappeared relatives, the group returned to Galatasaray Square in January 2009.

Time and again, the Saturday Mothers/People have been met with brutal crackdowns and even prosecutions for taking part in peaceful vigils. Turkish authorities have never provided a valid justification for their unlawful denial of the right to exercise freedom of expression and assembly. In August 2018, riot police used tear gas and water cannons as well as excessive force to disperse the hundreds of people who had peacefully gathered to mark the 700th weekly vigil. The justification for the intervention was a banning order by the Beyoğlu district governor on the grounds that the Square was not a designated location for assemblies and that they had not been notified of the assembly. 47 people were detained using excessive force. 46 of those were indicted in 2021 and are still facing the charges of 'refusing to disperse despite warnings.' Their prosecution continues.

Since August 2018, armed riot police are continuously stationed in Galatasaray Square, blockading all access and preventing peaceful protesters from assembling. Saturday Mothers/People are told by police each week that the district governorate's ban is in force and that their assembly is 'unauthorised', in contravention of the two Constitutional Court rulings handed down in November 2022 and March 2023.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Turkish, English.
You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 22 December 2023
Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PRONOUN: Saturday Mothers/People (ALL)