

Ladies and gentlemen: The "Human Rights Foundation of Turkey", HRFT is probably well known to everyone. For more than 10 years, this foundation has worked within two very important areas: documentation of torture in Turkey and rehabilitation of torture victims.

Five centers for torture victims have been established: in Adana, Ankara, Diyarbakir, Istanbul and Izmir. During recent years, more than 5000 torture victims have been treated at these centers. Approximately half of these torture victims had suffered recent torture - within the last seven days before presentation to the center. The work of the rehabilitation centers is deeply respected internationally.

Leading staff members of the HRFT have been persecuted by the Turkish authorities since 1995. There have been trials in which attempts have been made to make doctors provide names of victims they have treated - a signal breach of one of the cornerstones in all medical work: doctor/patient confidentiality. One of the arguments behind this absurd demand was that the victims would be able to identify torturers. In fact, the Turkish authorities could find out who the perpetrators are by asking at the nearest police station, because torture takes place at all Turkish police stations.

However, during the last 6 months, the authorities have escalated their persecution of the doctors who help torture victims. One doctor, Dr. Zeki Uzun, who does voluntary work at the Izmir center, has been subjected to psychological and physical torture at the police station in December 1999: his testes were wrenched, and he was exposed to attempts of strangulation. He was kept in solitary confinement, suffered sleep deprivation, etc. After the torture, he was brought to a government hospital, in which a doctor issued a statement that Dr. Zeki Uzun had not been subjected to torture. This doctor had not examined him before issuing the statement. As a result, the Turkish medical association intervened, saw to it that Dr. Zeki Uzun was examined. And there was conclusive evidence that he had been tortured.

And here we are at the heart of the problem. The real reason why the doctors are being persecuted is that now - after working with torture victims and carrying out research for more than a quarter of a century - we are able to establish whether torture has taken place. The fact that doctors, such as Dr. Zeki Uzun, are capable of diagnosing and proving torture presents a threat to those elements within the police force in Turkey, who still use torture - which incidentally is prohibited according to Turkish law. Doctors, who have dedicated their lives to the treatment of torture victims, are now being tortured themselves. This is obviously a threat to all work against torture in Turkey.

As an observer at the trial of Dr. Uzun in Izmir on may 23, 2000, I was encouraged that the situation might change for the better. The acquittal of Dr. Uzun, an internationally recognized doctor, was regarded as a positive development.

Dr. Uzun delivered a statement to the court referring to harassment and torture that had been inflicted by the authorities while he awaited trial. Because Dr. Uzun has been tortured we call upon the Turkey to fulfill its obligations under international law, specifically under articles 12, 13, and 14 of the UN convention against torture: to initiate a prompt and independent investigation of the alleged torture, to ensure impartial examination of the case, and to ensure redress, compensation and access to rehabilitation.

However, Dr. Zeki Uzun is not the only doctor currently being persecuted. The psychiatrist Alp Ayan, who is also affiliated with the center in Izmir, has been beaten, and the crutch he is forced to use due to a polio disease has been taken away from him. He has spent three months and three weeks in a Turkish prison.

The head of the Izmir center, the internationally recognized researcher, professor Veli Lok, also faced charges and was sentenced on Tuesday, June 13 this year. Professor Lok is a human rights defender and founding member of the HRFT. He is internationally known for his work on the diagnosis, documentation, and treatment of torture victims. The fact that such a recognized and respected professor as Dr. Veli Lok is being attacked means that no doctor, who is helping torture victims in Turkey, can feel secure. The charges against him consisted of "publishing his opinion about the decisions taken by the court before the trial has been concluded with the final decision" under Article 30/2 of the Press Law.

The sentencing of Professor Lok is a violation of the right to freedom of expression. The judgement against him is effectively an act of censorship: Professor Lok is not to publicly criticize Turkish authorities on the issue of torture for a period of five years. If he does so, he will be forced to pay a token fine. The message is perfectly clear - doctors in Turkey and not only being harassed and in some cases tortured, they are also being censored. Simply because they are providing treatment and support for victims of torture - doing their duty. There is a widespread fear in the medical community, and strong international condemnation is needed to reverse these developments.

There are other tragic consequences of these events: the torture victims are afraid of going to the doctor for the absolutely necessary help. At police stations, the victims are told that they are not permitted to see the doctor after the torture. This also jeopardizes the continued documentation of torture in Turkey.

The actions of the Turkish police in relation to Dr. Zeki Uzun, Dr. Alp Ayan and professor Veli Lok are not only criminal but also constitute a breach of international law. The actions of the Turkish authorities remain completely incomprehensible at a time when Turkey has made an obligation to work toward European human rights standards.

The International Rehabilitation Council For Torture Victims (IRCT) has started an international campaign, which in collaboration with other organizations, politicians, embassies, and medical institutions puts international pressure on the Turkish authorities in order to stop these crimes. At the trial in February 2000, the president of the Danish medical association, Jesper Poulsen, representatives from 5 embassies, delegates from rehabilitation centers in the US and Germany and I were present among others. At the trial on 11 April 2000, the Secretary-General of the World Medical Association Delon Human, director of the Danish Medical Association Jorgen Funder (also representing the standing committee of doctors in the European Union) and I (the undersigned) were present. Also the U.S. Center for Victims of Torture in Minnesota, the Berlin Medical Chamber, Swedish Red Cross, Amnesty International and other organizations have been present at the trials.

The presence of such a group of persons with representatives of the world medical association, embassies and rehabilitation centers must make it clear to the Turkish government that admission to the EU will not be possible, before the Turkish government - instead of escalating human rights violations including acts of torture - at least diminishes these with the purpose of putting a complete stop to the violation of human rights (specifically torture).

The national and international health profession have been closely monitoring the progress of the trials against doctors in Turkey. The developments warrant the concern of the entire international community. It is essential that doctors, especially those treating victims of torture, are able to provide the necessary assistance regardless of the religion, political or ethnic affiliation of the victims. The doctors must feel secure in providing treatment without fear of harassment or prosecution – simply because they are doing their duty.

The recent publication of a report by the human rights commission of the Turkish Parliament documents "widespread" use of torture in Turkey. Many victims were interviewed alleging the use of torture and the commission visited prisons and photographed torture equipment including electric cables. The victims stated they did not complain to the government or to the courts since very few complaints are acted upon.

This is the first time an official government body has admitted to the widespread practice of torture. The Turkish public is likely to give credence to such an official pronouncement and we hope it will mobilize civil society to urge the government to take meaningful action to eliminate the use of torture. It will depend on how the political parties respond to this report. When a party is out of power, it opposes the use of torture. But, when it is in power, it tends to deny or condone the practice. I urge the U.S. Congress to support their Turkish colleagues and the parliamentary commission report. At the Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE) in Romania the U.S. congressional delegation should lend its support for the report and urge the Turkish Government to take action to prevent the use of torture and punish the perpetrators.

Since 1990 the United Nations Committee Against Torture (CAT) and the CPT of the Council of Europe have been pointing to the torture condoned by the Turkish government year after year. These findings have now been confirmed by the report of the Parliamentary Committee. Over the years numerous NGO and INGOs, including IRCT, have pointed out these same conditions. We can only hope that the new Turkish report will have more impact than those of CAT and CPT have had until now.

Paradoxically, while the trials are going on against Turkish doctors, the Turkish government preparing a major shift in its prison system, moving away from holding prisoners in large wards to keeping them in smaller cells. eleven new prisons built on a cell model are due to come on line this year. While this move could represent an improvement over the ward system, which has been characterized by violence committed by both prisoners and security personnel, there is also cause for concern.

Human rights groups caution that the Turkish government may be intending to impose an isolation regime on prisoners held under the Anti-Terror law, cutting them off from human contact and productive activities in a manner that can be physically and mentally harmful. This type of isolation regime is already being employed at the Kartal Special Type prison in Istanbul, feared to be the prototype for the new generation of prisons. Human Rights Watch has reported that prisoners detained at Kartal are suffering the physical and psychological symptoms recorded elsewhere as an effect of small group isolation, including depression, anxiety, and deteriorating eyesight.

Unfortunately, concerns about the plans for the new prisons have been fueled by the complete lack of transparency surrounding the move. In order to restore confidence in Turkey's troubled system, the government should, among other things, commit to undertaking the kind of external, independent monitoring mechanisms recommended at the OSCE implementation meeting in March.

Once again: It is indeed a tragedy when those treating victims of torture themselves become victims of torture. I therefore urge all of you to contribute to ensuring that Turkey fulfils international obligations in relation to the treatment of torture victims, the prevention of torture, and the prosecution of perpetrators.