

TURKEY

ISSUE

The human rights situation in Turkey remains of concern. Reports of torture and disappearances while in custody, as well as restrictions on freedom of expression and the arrest of journalists and authors, are among the most troubling issues.

BACKGROUND

Turkey is a constitutional republic with a multi-party system and a functioning democracy. A member of the Council of Europe, the European Commission of Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights, Turkey is signatory to several major international agreements on human rights including the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Newspapers, magazines and television outlets cover a wide political spectrum. Freedom of religious expression is tolerated within the secular parameters of the Turkish constitution.

A separatist, guerrilla war has been waged in the southeast of the country since 1984 by the stalinist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a terrorist organization. The PKK conducts terrorist operations inside and outside Turkey. Following the Gulf War, the PKK gained relative freedom of movement in northern Iraq and has used the area to launch strikes inside Turkish territory. For its part, Turkey has on many occasions entered Iraqi territory to conduct operations against the PKK.

The war in the southeast has been at times brutal with both sides being accused of severe human rights abuses. For example, hundreds of local administrators, including teachers, have been assassinated by insurgents. To deny infiltrators sanctuary, hundreds of thousands of villagers have been forced to relocate to urban centres and some 3000 villages have been destroyed.

Six provinces of the southeast still fall under the authority of an "Emergency Rule" Governorship, essentially martial law. Additionally, country-wide anti-terrorist legislation gives the authorities powers to suppress all forms of support for the PKK. These special powers are largely connected with allegations of mistreatment of prisoners, torture and disappearance at the hands of the security authorities, as well as the circumscription of freedom of expression which led to jail sentences for journalists and even members of Parliament. However, police abuse of power and instances of brutality are not linked exclusively to the fight against the PKK, but seem to be part of long established police practices which predate the PKK. Control of police abuses by civilian authorities is perhaps the most fundamental human rights problem in Turkey.

While the Government of Mesut Yilmaz has, since it came to power in July 1997, expressed its intention to improve the human rights situation, concrete, measurable change has been slow. The Government has openly admitted that legislative modifications to the constitution, criminal code and the anti-terrorism law are needed and has promised to enact these changes.