

Turkey Blasted for Rights Abuses In Crackdown on Kurd Separatists

By Daniel Grossman

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ANKARA, TURKEY

ALI ASLAN, a Turkish activist, says he suffered eight years of government harassment, imprisonment, and torture. Mr. Aslan says his only "crimes" were union organizing, distributing political publications, and speaking out against human rights abuses.

But under Turkey's powerful security laws, he was detained three times and spent nearly two years in prison.

Aslan's case is not unique.

Turkey's antiterrorism law prohibits activities promoting separatism and other policies opposed to the state. It has used this law, and its wide interpretation, to detain hundreds of political prisoners in the past year, according to the human rights group Amnesty International.

Turkey has cracked down on people either speaking out for or on behalf of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a Marxist group that is fighting to create a separatist Kurd state.

Just last week, eight Kurdish members of parliament were given three to 15-year prison sentences for speaking out on behalf of the Kurdish people.

Turkey has been sharply criticized for mistreating prisoners, for failing to permit free expression, and for targeting civilians in the battle against Kurdish separatists.

John Shattuck, US assistant secretary of state for human rights and labor, visited Turkey in October, and has said he is concerned about growing suppression of human rights in Turkey.

"Turkey is not like other Western democratic countries," says Akin Birdal, director of the Ankara-based Turkish Human Rights Association - one of Turkey's leading human rights advocacy groups. "There is no right to think, no right to write, and no right to speak your mind."

"I can't say human rights conditions are anything to be proud of," admits Hızir Eksi, a high-level official in the State Ministry of Human Rights in Ankara.

Mr. Eksi blames the bloody separatist insurgency in Turkey's southeast provinces for his country's poor human rights record.

In the last year, the PKK has targeted government workers, including school teachers, dozens of whom it has assassinated in its efforts to disrupt government activity in the disputed region.

As an editor of a prominent Turkish newspaper explained, the public is weary of the violence and willing to accept whatever is necessary to put an end to the conflict. "A radical improvement in the human rights situation under these circumstances," he says, "is impossible."

Eksi acknowledges that torture does occur in Turkish jails

will not be completed until next March. But one administration official familiar with the visit said "there is great concern about the situation," which will be reflected in the report.

Human rights officials in both the US and Turkey say that a proposal being considered in the Turkish parliament to revamp the country's antiterrorism law may signal a new attitude toward human rights.

The proposal will make it more difficult to arrest someone for opposing government policies. The current antiterrorism law sanc-

KEVIN MAZUR/ANAP/FILE



TURKEY: A soldier rounding up Kurds in 1993. Under Turkey's powerful antiterrorism law, its military has detained scores of political prisoners - some for participating in the PKK, others for speaking out in support of Kurds' human rights.

and prisons. But he says the practice is not officially sanctioned. "People who run prisons and work there believe in torture," he says. "For us to change these people will take time."

Earlier this year, the United States Congress withheld 10 percent of US military aid to Turkey, pending the completion of a report on human rights abuses by the State Department.

The State Department report

tions arresting anyone whose acts or ideas "threaten the indivisible unity of the State," wording that has been interpreted broadly.

According to the Turkish Daily News, an English-language newspaper published in Turkey, over 5,000 people are in jail or awaiting trial for violating the current law.

Eksi says many of the prisoners will be freed if the amendments are approved.

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