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for the Protection of
Human Rights Defenders

Turkey: First hearing in latest trial against Saturday Mothers/People

Today, a joint report by the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders—a partnership between the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)—and the International Observatory for Lawyers in Danger (OIAD) presents findings from the judicial observation of the first hearing in the trial of 20 individuals involved in the Saturday Mothers/People movement on February 27, 2024. They are being prosecuted for participating in peaceful gatherings, highlighting the systematic attacks on the right of assembly in Turkey. The next hearing will be held this Friday, June 7, 2024.

Paris, 5 June 2024 –The Saturday Mothers/People (Cumartesi Anneleri/İnsanları) have gathered every Saturday at noon in Istanbul's Galatasaray Square since 1995, to demand accountability for the enforced disappearances of their family members during the political unrest of the 1980s and 1990s in Turkey. For many years - and especially since 2018 -, the Beyoğlu District Governorship in Istanbul has systematically banned these peaceful vigils, leading to repeated arbitrary arrests and detention of their representatives and excessive use of force by law enforcement, including “security circles” and unnecessary handcuffing of protesters.

- **Case details**

The case observed involves 20 individuals — relatives of the disappeared but also human rights defenders and a lawyer supporting the Saturday Mothers/People — who were detained and prosecuted for participating in the peaceful 950th weekly vigil on June 10, 2023. They are charged with “attending illegal demonstrations and marches without arms and failing to disperse despite warning”. The charges were pressed against them despite Turkey’s Constitutional Court’s rulings on November 16, 2022, and March 29, 2023, upholding the right to peaceful assembly of the Saturday Mothers/People.

During the first hearing on February 27, 2024, no major procedural issues were noted and it can be considered that fair trial rights were upheld. However, the judge refused to order the defendants’ immediate acquittal, as it was expected given the baseless accusations in the light of the recent CC rulings.

- **Erosion of Civil Liberties in Turkey**

The Saturday Mothers/People vigils have become a powerful symbol of civil society's fight for justice, human rights, and accountability for past violations in Turkey. This case highlights Turkey's alarming erosion of civil rights, including the right to freedom of assembly. Turkish authorities disregard the rule of law by ignoring national and international court decisions, including multiple condemnations by the European Court of Human Rights.

The mere fact that the trial took place, despite the Constitutional Court’s judgments qualifying any restrictions on the Saturday Mothers/People’s right to freedom of assembly as unconstitutional, raises concerns regarding respect for constitutional rights and fundamental rule of law principles.

“The aim of this procedure is not only to criminalise the peaceful vigils of the Saturday Mothers/People and their legitimate quest for justice. It has a considerable and detrimental chilling effect on protestors and all human rights defenders in Turkey, as it discourages them from taking



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part in future demonstrations and expressing dissent. This constitutes a direct assault on the fundamental right to peaceful assembly and a limitation to the right of people in Turkey to freely express their opinions and defend human rights by calling for accountability for past violations,” said **representatives from the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders.**

“Freedom of expression and the right to demonstrate are fundamental rights that must be guaranteed, particularly when exercised to draw attention to enforced disappearances and to demand truth and justice. Lawyers who do not abandon the side of the families of the forcibly disappeared, and indeed join them in their vigils, are exercising their democratic rights while also performing humanity, which deserve protection at all costs,” said **representatives from the International Observatory for Lawyers in Danger.**

- ***Upcoming hearings***

The next hearing in the case against the 20 representatives of Saturday Mothers/People and their supporters will take place on June 7, 2024 at 2 pm. The remaining defendants will be heard, allowing the prosecutor to submit requisitions. The Saturday Mothers/People and their lawyers will continue to demand an end to impunity and accountability for the crimes committed against their loved ones, especially as they recently [held](#) their 1000th vigil on May 25, 2024.

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