

Turkey: Prison massacre [of December 2000]

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Between 19 and 22 December 2000 the Turkish military and police carried out a massive and brutal operation against revolutionary prisoners. The prisoners were protesting against plans to change the structure of the prison system from one where prisoners are able to freely associate within the confines of their dormitories to a cellular system, whereby they will be subject to lengthy periods of solitary confinement. 20,000 grenades, gas and incendiary bombs were dropped on 20 prisons and 10,000 military and police personnel deployed. Thirty-three people were killed and hundreds wounded. There has been no international outcry and the story barely flickered across British TV screens over the Christmas period.

A visit to Turkish prisons by the UN Committee for the Prevention of Torture had just concluded on 19 December when the security forces began bombarding the prisons, breaking through the walls with bombs and power tools, and then throwing in grenade after grenade. After the fashion of the most murderous NATO operations, the massacre was named Hayata Donus which means Return to Life, with the state claiming its aim was to 'rescue' prisoners who had been forced against their will to participate in a protest hunger-strike. The real aim was to break the prisoners' resistance and move them by force to the new cellular prisons.

F-type prisons

The move from dormitory prisons to cellular ones is something the Turkish state has been planning for at least ten years. It has made several previous attempts to effect the transition but has faced such strong resistance that they have been aborted. This time the move to the 'F-type' prisons has been undertaken with determination.

Turkey wishes to cast off its 'Midnight Express' torturer image in order to curry favour with the European Union, the US and the IMF. All these need to be reassured that, following the ending of the Kurdish nationalist armed struggle, Turkey has its left-wing opposition subjugated to a degree where it cannot threaten the interests of capitalism. On 6 December 2000 impending economic disaster was averted by an IMF pledge of \$7 billion. Criminal investigations into ten banks resulted in massive sales of treasury bills and company stocks. Panic drove interest rates over 200% and the Turkish lira was threatened with devaluation until the IMF stepped in to bail the Turkish government out.

Not only was there no international outcry against the barbarism of the December onslaught, but there is compelling evidence that the US knew ten days in advance that the prison massacre was to take place. On 12 December it closed its consulates in Adana and Istanbul, stating that it feared attack by militants from the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP-C).

Furthermore, the Turkish state has realised that the US, Britain, France and Germany actually control and subjugate their political prisoners more effectively by the seemingly more 'civilised' methods of isolation and mental torture. The Turkish authorities claimed that they had become too scared to enter the prison dormitories, so extensive is the control of political fanatics. This is clearly not true; nonetheless, Turkish prisons, like the British ones which held Irish political prisoners through many years of struggle, have functioned as schools for revolutionaries. Political prisoners are organised within them, have representative committees and command structures; there are discussion groups, political education classes and debates, lessons in history, economics and, among PKK prisoners, the Kurdish language. None of this is tolerable to either the Turkish state or its international backers and allies.

Resistance

On 18 October 2000 revolutionary prisoners from the DHKP-C, the Communist Party of Turkey Marxist-Leninist (TKP-ML) and the Communist Workers' Party of Turkey (TKIP) had begun a hunger-strike to the death in protest against the government's plans to transfer them to the 'F-type' prison cells. The hunger strike was indefinite and several hundred prisoners divided into 'teams' participated. At the time of the attack the first team had been on hunger-strike for 61 days.

In the women's prison at Bayrampasa, the bombardment began at 5am. Ayla Ozcan described what happened in a statement to her lawyer:

'When I looked outside from the window I saw the special military units on the roofs. They were wearing gas masks and their long-range rifles were directed at the dormitory...They were swearing at us. "We came here to kill you," they were saying...After opening several holes in the ceiling, the bombardment with gas bombs began. We were choking and trying to gasp for air. While covering our mouths and noses with wet towels to neutralise the effect of the gas, we were breaking the windows of our dormitory to get some fresh air. The rain of gas bombs was continuing. We moved towards the windows to get some air. Some of our friends fainted...

'Approximately 700 to 1,000 bombs were thrown at us. We had nothing to retaliate with but we shouted slogans back at them. The bombs started to burn us and while we were trying to put the fire out, we were also inhaling gas.

'At around noon they started to throw nerve gas and fire bombs at us. Most of us choked and lost consciousness. The flames started to cover the dormitory. Those who had not fainted yet were continuing to shout slogans and sing marching songs. The fire spread all over the dormitory. We all moved towards the door; we had to get out. Everywhere was shrouded in smoke and fire.

'Because of the effect of the gas some of us lost consciousness. I fell too. Some of my comrades fell over me. I could not breathe. Then one of my comrades pushed me out of the door. The threshold was as hot as hell. Nothing could be seen because of the smoke.

'Downstairs some comrades were throwing water on themselves to try and stop burning. Hair, hands and the backs of most of us were burnt. I saw Ebru Dincer sitting on the stairs, fully burnt. She could not speak and her hands, face, hair and most parts of her body were burnt. Then our comrades Hacer Arikan, Birsen Kars and Gulizar Kesici were taken out of the flames with a great effort. There were still some comrades inside. Everyone was running from one place to another. Finally two comrades re-entered the dormitory to search for the others. When they returned empty-handed, their faces, hair and hands were burnt too. When we went downstairs we noticed that Nilufer, Seyhan, Ozlem, Sefinur and the Death Fast First Team fighter Gulseren Ozturk were not amongst us. They were left in the blaze. While our comrades were burning alive, the murderers were filming their creation with pleasure. They had water hoses but they were not squirting water into the burning dormitory.

'After a while we came out of the exercise area from the ground floor dormitory. We started to dance the halay (traditional Anatolian dance). We were replying to the enemy, saying "You could not make us surrender, you were defeated"...

'Meanwhile the murderers were entering one by one from the door that was cut off. Our resistance had been continuing for seven hours. While our injured comrades were trying to come out of the dormitory, the murderers opened fire at them with their long-range rifles.

'We gathered in the middle of the exercise area and held tight to each other. The murderers entered the dormitory and directed their rifles at us from the windows. They were pointing at us and in a cowardly fashion saying "Come towards us one by one, surrender yourselves".

'We said we would not surrender and if they wished to they should come and take us. We were continuously shouting at them. "You burnt our friends alive. You will pay for this. You will present an account to our people."

'They started to approach slowly. They dragged us on the floor along the corridor to a big hall, beating us all the way. The resistance of our male comrades was still continuing. Later on they took us to hospital one by one. We were beaten there too since we refused an immoral body search. They asked me and the other Death Fast fighters whether we would accept medical treatment or not. We said "No, we refuse, we continue our Death Fast".

'They put 14 of us in a transport vehicle in completely wet clothes. We were all shivering. We were not allowed to go to the toilet or drink water. They were telling us to soil our pants. After waiting hours they took us to Bakirkoy remand prison. They were continuously filming while all this was happening. They wanted to put us into the cells one by one when we arrived at the prison. We refused. Then they had to put us in threes.

'From now on, maybe we will all die one by one but we will never agree to surrender. Once again they are the defeated, we and our people are the victors. We continue the Death Fast. We will continue until victory.'

Similar scenes took place in prisons across Turkey, with prisoners in Cannakale fighting for a long time and those at Umraniye holding out for four days, until the prisons were literally dismantled around them by bulldozers. The struggle in Umraniye was humiliating for the Turkish army which was seen to be having problems defeating unarmed prisoners. Umraniye is a working class area of Istanbul, which, alongside the Gazi district, has always been a place of struggle. Shortly before the military coup of 1980, 105 people who were resisting the demolition of their shanty town, were murdered by the security forces in Umraniye.

State lies

A few days after the massacre, a long argued-over Amnesty Bill became law in Turkey and nearly 20,000 prisoners were released within a few days, in time for the end of Ramadan. These releases did nothing to detract from the slaughter as the amnesty was almost entirely restricted to non-political prisoners.

Furthermore, the Turkish government has been particularly bad at maintaining a consistent line about the prison situation. While Justice Minister Hikmet Sami Turk gave the 'rescuing hunger-strikers' line, Health Minister Osman Durmus responded to questions about the duration of the hunger-strike by saying 'There is no death fast so how is it possible to determine how many days have gone by?' This was echoed by Interior Minister Sadettin Tantan, who said 'There is nobody on a death fast', simultaneously owning up to the real purpose of the attack and its pre-planning: 'Operations had been organised for a year'.

These inconsistencies have not stopped the government maintaining a stranglehold over the Turkish media and in the process influencing external press agencies against the prisoners and in favour of the state. Consequently, despite very little coverage of any kind, newspapers both in Turkey and abroad have managed to print the lies that the dormitories were 'run like indoctrination centres', the operation was therefore necessary to regain control, and, most disgustingly, that the six women who burned to death at Bayrampasa set themselves on fire deliberately.

Victory to the prisoners!

The Death Fast continues within the hospitals and cellular prisons which the prisoners have been moved to. As we go to press two hunger-strikers have died and many others are near death. Solidarity hunger-strikes are taking place in prisons in Germany, Spain, France and Greece. Actions by supporters which have ranged from bomb attacks to demonstrations to imaginative occupations, like the one of the London Eye on 20 December, will continue. FRFI wishes to express its deep respect for and solidarity with all those in struggle against the brutal Turkish prison system.

Yasasin devrimci tutuklular!

Victory to the revolutionary prisoners!

Said Akgul, Sinan Bostanci,

Nicki Jameson, Trevor Rayne

For details of events in London contact: The Struggle Committee Against the Death Cells, Unit C1, 3-19 Victorian Grove, London N16 8EN. For regular updates on the Turkish prison struggle go to www.ozgurluk.org [Note: Link seems to no longer be available. –BT.net]