

Turkish doctors sentenced to 20-months in prison for an anti-war declaration

Torture Journal Editorial team

11 Central Council members of the Turkish Medical Association (TMA) were given a 20-month prison sentence for a statement they made in January 2018, declaring that war is a public health problem.¹ One of them was additionally sentenced to 1 year, 6 months and 22 days.

The case takes place in a context of political intimidation and attacks on hundreds of doctors, forensic experts, and other health professionals, as well as journalists and academics in Turkey for discharging their ethical and professional duties. In a recent report, for example, Human Rights Watch identified that, in Turkey, “there are over 1,500 lawyers on trial on terrorism charges at time of writing. Their cases underscore the dramatic erosion of defendants’ rights and due process in Turkey”.²

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¹ See http://www.ttb.org.tr/haber_goster.php?Guid=28de85da-00e5-11e8-a05f-429c499923e4

² See <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/turkey>

In December last year, Dr Sebnem Korur Fincanci,³ President of the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (HRFT) forensic expert and academic author in our journal, was sentenced to two and a half years in prison for signing a peace petition in 2016 organized by a group of Turkish academics. Another case launched against Dr. Şebnem Korur Fincancı, where she has been tried since 2016, for taking part in a solidarity campaign to defend the independence of the newspaper *Özgür Gündem*.

In 2017, Dr Serdar Kuni,⁴ a medical doctor working for HRFT in Cizre in Southeastern Turkey, was handed a four-year prison sentence, while several other HRFT founders, staff and volunteers are facing trials and investigations besides the legal personnel at HRFT as a result of their work as human rights defenders.

The TMA is the largest of its kind in Turkey with over 83,000 members representing 80 percent of the country’s doctors and is the Turkish affiliate of the World Medical Association. Following the sentence, a large number of organisations spoke out against the decision and in defence of human rights defenders in Turkey. Below is a summary of the Statements:

The International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT), a network of more than 160 torture rehabilitation centres in over 70 countries and the world’s largest membership-based civil society organisation specialised in the field of torture rehabilitation, condemned the sentencing of the 11 members of the TMA

³ See <https://irct.org/media-and-resources/latest-news/article/980>

⁴ See <https://irct.org/media-and-resources/latest-news/article/913>

and calls on the Turkish courts to overturn the convictions and immediately drop all charges. *“This is an affront to all of us working on health and human rights,”* said Jorge Aroche, President of the IRCT. *“Medical professionals play a key role in defending human rights. By providing psychosocial support and redress to victims, we help reconstruct societies, and promote democracy and freedom. We have been witnessing increasing threats, harassment and persecution of medical practitioners around the world. We stand in solidarity with our colleagues”*.⁵

Donna McKay, Executive Director of Physicians for Human Rights stated, *“this gratuitous court decision is a new low in the attacks on doctors and the practice of health care, which have now become commonplace in Turkey,”*. *“The sentencing of doctors who have bravely spoken out on the impact of war on the wellbeing of innocent civilians is an affront to both freedom of speech and the critical role medical professionals play in highlighting situations that pose risks to public health and the delivery of health care. War has extraordinary health consequences. This unwarranted sentence is clearly intended to silence and intimidate the Turkish Medical Association and any medical professionals in Turkey who dare to speak out”*.⁶

The Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME) joined by the World Medical Association condemn the outcome of the trial against the members of the Council (2016-2018) of the TMA. *“Denouncing violence and supporting human rights and peace is not a criminal*

offence. We very much regret the outcome of the trial and we stand by the leaders of the Turkish Medical Association in their efforts to respect the ethics of the medical profession” said the CPME President, Prof. Dr Frank Ulrich Montgomery.⁷ The Section on Psychological Consequences of Torture and Persecution of the World Psychiatric Association has also expressed its deepest concern. These are just some of the worldwide voices expressing their opposition to this situation.

⁵ See <https://irct.org/media-and-resources/latest-news/article/991>

⁶ See <https://phr.org/news/prison-sentencing-of-turkish-doctors-for-calling-war-a-public-health-problem-is-an-egregious-miscarriage-of-justice/>

⁷ See <https://www.wma.net/news-post/statement-on-the-outcome-of-the-trial-against-the-turkish-doctor-leaders/>