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### **Turkey: Members of Saturday Mothers/People face a new trial for exercising their right to peaceful assembly**

On 4 May 2023, the first hearing of fourteen members of **Saturday Mothers/People (Cumartesi Anneleri/İnsanları)** took place at Küçükçekmece 1<sup>st</sup> Penal Court of First Instance in Istanbul. The human rights defenders are charged with attending an illegal demonstration and not dispersing against warning. The prosecutor is asking the court to prosecute the fourteen defenders under the Law on Meetings and Demonstrations (Law no. 2911). All but two human rights defenders gave their statements and the hearing is set to continue on 26 May 2023.

[Saturday Mothers/People](#) is a group comprised of human rights defenders and families of victims of enforced disappearances in Turkey during the 1990s. Human rights defenders and the families of the victims gathered in Galatasaray Square in Istanbul for the first time on 27 May 1995, calling for an end to enforced disappearances, seeking information on the whereabouts of those who were forcibly disappeared and demanding justice for the victims. They continued to meet regularly until 1999 when the group had to cease their gatherings due to persistent attacks by security forces. Ten years later, on 31 January 2009, Saturday Mothers/People resumed their peaceful gatherings in Galatasaray Square without any disruption, until their 700<sup>th</sup> week on 25 August 2018. Since then, the group is not allowed to assemble at Galatasaray Square.

The Küçükçekmece 1<sup>st</sup> Penal Court of First Instance held the first hearing for the fourteen human rights defenders of the Saturday Mothers/People group on 4 May 2023. The group faces charges under article 32/1 of Law 2911 for attending an unarmed illegal demonstration and failing to disperse against warning which is punishable by prison sentence between a year and six months to three years.

On 30 August 2022, fourteen members of Saturday Mothers/People went to Altınşehir Graveyard for the Unidentified in Istanbul, where the bodies of two forcibly disappeared were found in 1995, to mark the International Day of Victims of Enforced Disappearances by making a press statement at the cemetery. The security forces, who were made aware of the gathering through the group's call on the social media account of Human Rights Association Istanbul branch, blockaded the neighbourhood before the group arrived and encircled the human rights defenders and families of the disappeared in a "security perimeter", not allowing them to enter the cemetery. The police warned the group to disperse through a loudspeaker without allowing them to leave the police blockade. All human rights defenders were detained and taken to Istanbul Police Headquarters and eventually released after their statements were taken. The same day, the group was rearrested upon the objection of the public prosecutor and released again that evening. They were later charged following an investigation by the public prosecutor.

The indictment against the fourteen human rights defenders consists of only four paragraphs in which it is stated that the police stopped the group before the gate of the cemetery and informed them that the district governor had banned the gathering. According to the indictment, the police warned the group to disperse and if they didn't leave they would be arrested, claiming that the police waited for the group to disperse but as they refused to leave and lifted banners, they intervened in a proportionate manner and arrested everyone.

This case is part of a pattern of criminalisation of Saturday Mothers/People as [another criminal case](#) in which forty six human rights defenders of the organisation are facing the same charges is still ongoing at the Istanbul 21<sup>st</sup> Criminal Court of First Instance since 25 March 2021. The next hearing of this case will be on 7 July 2023. On 25 August 2018, the group was violently dispersed and arrested during their 700<sup>th</sup> gathering to demand justice for their loved ones at Galatasaray Square. Four human rights defenders are defendants in both cases. The human rights defenders have been banned from their landmark spot at Galatasaray Square since 2018, they have been repeatedly arrested and violently dispersed and have faced judicial harassment in an attempt to criminalise them.

Authorities have not abided to the [Constitutional Court decision](#) of 23 February 2023, which ruled that the State violated the “right to hold meetings and demonstration marches” of the applicant, who is a member of the Saturday Mothers/People. The Court also stated in its judgement that “wanting to hold a vigil and make a press statement by the applicant and the group she is a member of, to demand that their family members' be found and to raise awareness in the society about this particular issue should be met with respect in a democratic society.”

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned with the persistent attacks on the Saturday Mothers/People, as it believes it to be a reprisal against its legitimate and peaceful human rights work. The organisation expresses its particularly concern with the apparent lack of guarantees of due process, and the pattern of criminalisation.

**Front Line Defenders calls on the Turkish authorities to:**

1. Drop the charges and dismiss the case against fourteen human rights defenders as it is believed that the charges are solely motivated by their legitimate and non-violent work defending human rights;
2. End the ongoing legal and practical harassment of Saturday Mothers/People lifting the ban of the peaceful gatherings;
3. Respect the February 2023 decision of the Constitutional Court;
4. Ensure an environment that all human rights defenders in Turkey are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities, including the right to peaceful assembly without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.