

21 October 2019

Turkey: Saturday Mothers/People's right to peaceful assembly must be guaranteed

On 12 October 2019, police used pepper spray and batons to disperse a weekly vigil held by human rights group, **Saturday Mothers/People**, after they released a press statement in which they questioned the whereabouts of Cemil Kırbayır, who disappeared in police custody during the 1980 military coup, as well as sharing their comments and peace demands on Turkey's cross-border military operation into northern Syria. Saturday Mothers/People have been gathering in front of the Human Rights Association's (İHD) İstanbul Office every Saturday to read out weekly press statements after they were banned from staging weekly vigils at their original location, Galatasaray Square, in August 2018.

Saturday Mothers/People is a human rights group, comprised of human rights defenders and families of victims of enforced disappearance in Turkey. They began organising weekly vigils at Galatasaray Square after the detention of Hasan Ocak on 21 March 1995 and the subsequent discovery of his tortured body in a common grave. Human rights defenders and the families of the victims gathered in Galatasaray Square for the first time on 27 May 1995, demanding an end to enforced disappearances, seeking information on the whereabouts of those who had disappeared and justice for those affected. The group decided to cease its weekly vigils on 13 March 1999 after they were increasingly targeted by police attacks. The vigils resumed on 31 January 2009. On 25 August 2018, the initiative marked its 700th week of protests. According to data released by Truth Justice Memory Center, since the military coup on 12 September 1980 at least 1,352 people have been forcibly disappeared in Turkey. Among the 344 disappeared individuals for whom a complaint was lodged, the perpetrators were only convicted in 2 of those cases, a figure which has been condemned by the European Court of Human Rights.

On 24 August 2019, the day before the 700th vigil held by Saturday Mothers/People, protests organised in Galatasaray Square were banned by the Beyoğlu district governorate, upon the order of the Ministry of the Interior. On 25 August 2018, police dispersed the vigil and arrested forty-seven protesters, many of whom were relatives of forcibly disappeared individuals. The detained protesters were released from police custody later that day. There was no investigation into the police officers who used excessive force against the peaceful protesters. The Saturday Mothers/People had to start organizing their civil disobedience vigils in front of the İHD İstanbul Office, which is located in a very narrow street in Beyoğlu, instead of its original public location, Galatasaray Square.

On 12 October 2019, Saturday Mothers/People, many of whom were elderly women, gathered in front of the İHD İstanbul Office as they do each Saturday. While Gülseren Yoleri, woman human rights defender and Chair of the İHD İstanbul Branch, was reading out the press statement, she questioned the whereabouts of Cemil Kırbayır, who was disappeared in police custody during the 1980 military coup. In addition said that, as they had experienced the consequences of massive destruction caused by policies of violence and conflict, the Saturday Mothers/People were calling on Turkey to solve all of its problems through peaceful means, within the standards of law and justice. Therefore, she repeated their demands for peace and called for an end to Turkey's recent cross-border military operation into northern Syria, before it causes any more casualties. As she read the statement, the police used pepper spray and batons to disperse the crowd, forcing them to retreat into the İHD office building.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned at the harassment of the Saturday Mothers/People's weekly vigils and the use of excessive force against peaceful protesters. Front Line Defenders

reminds the Turkish authorities that the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression are guaranteed under domestic and international law, including the European Declaration of Human Rights, to which Turkey is a party. Front Line Defenders believes that members of Saturday Mothers/People are being targeted solely as a result of exercising their fundamental rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Turkey to:

1. Ensure that the right to freedom of assembly and expression of Saturday Mothers/People are respected, allowing them to hold weekly vigils undisturbed at Galatasaray Square.
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the allegations of police brutality against the group, with a view to bringing the responsible police officers to justice in accordance with international standards.
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Turkey are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.