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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[11 February 2019]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

Syrian Arab Republic: attacks conducted by the Turkish army need to be denounced and Kurds in occupied Afrin need to be protected

On 20 January 2018, the Turkish army launched the “Operation Olive Branch” against the Syrian-Kurdish region of Afrin in the Northwest of the Syrian Arab Republic. Since that day, the Turkish army occupies the region. The armed attack constitutes a violation of public international law.

We, the Society for Threatened Peoples, kindly appeal to you to take all necessary and appropriate steps to protect the Kurds and to use your influence within the United Nations to prevent another Turkish attack from occurring.

Afrin: One Year Under Turkish Occupation

Since the Turkish military operation has been started, about 250,000 Kurdish people fled their homes. About 100,000 remained in Afrin. Those who fled are now living as refugees in provisory camps in the region between Aleppo and Afrin. The living conditions in the refugee camps are inhumane: the food, water and health requirements cannot sufficiently be fulfilled. The people, who remain in Afrin suffer from the same degrading conditions, while also being subjects to arbitrary arrests and lootings by members of Turkish military and Syrian Islamists. In particular, the situation for minorities has aggravated.

Background

About three million Kurds lived in Syria until 2011 and they made up about 15% of the overall population. They live in two enclaves: Jazira, east of the river Euphrates, in the country’s north-east and in Afrin, in the north-west of Syria. During the Syrian civil war, a peaceful daily life was possible in Afrin; many people believed that this was the origin of a democratic Syria. Afrin was supposed to be a self-governed region in a federal state, where minorities were protected. It was a place of protection and hope for the construction of a democratic and social society not only for its residents, but also for refugees. During the civil war, pro-Assad regime-troops withdrew from the region in 2012. Shortly after in 2014 the Kurdish militia People’s Protection Units (YPG) took control of the city and established three cantons in Afrin, Kobani (Kobane) and Jazira under the name Rojava (West Kurdistan). Based on human rights violations carried out by the Turkish military it now occupies the region.

Since March 2018, the Turkish government and Syrian Islamists try to impose extensive societal changes. Kurdish civilians have systematically been threatened, displaced, robbed and in some cases even killed. The Turkish military prevents Kurdish civilians from doing their work. As a consequence, they lose their economic grounds. Infrastructure and monuments are being destroyed. Villages, mountains, valleys and even streets and public places are renamed, so that they now have Arabic or Turkish names. In conclusion, Afrin’s occupation threatens the survival of the Kurdish language, culture and national identity.

Arabization, Turkification and Islamization

Turkish military and Syrian Islamists are alleged to have demolished at least 32 schools in Afrin. Approximately, 318 schools, institutes and universities have been closed. About 50,000 children lack access to education. Turkish educational material is being used in still existing schools. The Turkish occupation troops force the Kurdish population to use either the Turkish or Arabic language. All official institutions and buildings have to carry the Turkish flag. It is said that the market square has been renamed ‘Erdogan-Square’. In mosques only radical-Islamist Imams, who are influenced by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs ‘Diyanet’, are allowed to preach.

Kurdish women are extraordinarily vulnerable victims of the occupation. They are forced to veil themselves. The Kurdish-Muslim population in Afrin has always been tolerant towards other religions.

Women enjoyed equal rights. This culture of tolerance is now threatened in Afrin. The Turkish military and Syrian Islamists preach radical Islamic convictions.

Homicides, abductions, arrests and forced disappearance

After 300 days of occupation Kurdish civilians face constant oppression and violence. A war economy has been established through kidnappings. Kidnap victims report torture and abuse conducted by Turkish military and Syrian Islamists. Furthermore, Kurdish homes are regularly looted. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights accounts for 2,450 Kurdish captives under Turkish control. However, the actual number may be higher. Many former captives fear punishment if they report their abduction. On a regular basis, Kurdish civilians are being murdered or disappear.

Lootings and theft of crops

Several sources report that the Turkish government exported 50,000 tons of olive oil from Afrin in the fall of 2018. It was noted that the Turkish military opened a border crossing on November 8 in Jinderes. Turkish political representatives addressed this topic in parliament. The Turkish Ministry of Agriculture has even confirmed that large numbers of olive oil tanks are transported from Afrin through this crossing border to Turkey. Olive orchards were destroyed in order to use the trees as firewood. Furthermore, large numbers of olive trees and forests were burnt down. Supplementary, large areas of agricultural land have been made useless.

Large areas along the Turkish border have been depopulated by Turkish troops and allied Islamist forces. This violates public international law. Kurdish civilians describe the first days of the occupation as a plague. Some journalists were able to report the lootings.

Destruction of infrastructure

Years of development of infrastructure, including electricity and internet connections, in Afrin has been systematically destroyed since the Turkish occupation has started.

The Turkish government sealed the region from other parts of the country off. Up until today, the access to humanitarian assistance and relief has not been part on the Turkish political agenda.

Destruction of cultural heritage

During the attacks on Afrin cultural heritage like the temple in Ain Dara (south of Afrin) as well as the Hori-citadel was destroyed. Graveyards have also been subjects of the attacks.

Forced displacement of Yazidis, Christians and Alevi from Afrin

Yazidis, Christians and Alevi were residing in Afrin until Turkish military forcibly displaced them. The Turkish occupation constitutes a threat to minorities, especially as Turkish allies, radical Islamists spread hatred towards adherents of other religions.

Yazidis are especially threatened. In Afrin, about 20,000 to 30,000 Yazidis lived in villages along the Mount Simon, namely Basufan, Baadi, Barad, Kimar, Iska, Shadere, Ghazzawiya, Burj Abdalo and Ain Dara. They fled as these villages were attacked by Turkish military, even though Yazidis are an integral part of Afrini society. It is uncertain how many Yazidis still live in Afrin. According to reports from eyewitnesses, Turkish military often speaks of ‘freeing’ villages in Afrin from Yazidis.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to:

- Call on all arms exporters to stop arms deliveries and arms exports to Turkey immediately
- Condemn the Turkish war of aggression and the illegal occupation of Afrin.
- Call on Turkish to withdraw its army from the north of the neighboring country Syrian Arab Republic. In addition, the NATO countries must provide enough medical supplies and food for the

civilian population in Afrin – and it must be ensured that Afrin will be able to keep an autonomous status in the Syrian Arab Republic.

- To call for the protection of the civilian population of Afrin from Islamist attacks. The plundering and the arbitrary arrests must be stopped immediately – and there have to be measures to ensure that the displaced persons can return.
 - To condemn the war crimes committed by the Turkish army, by Islamist militias, and other conflict parties, and to ensure that human rights violations and other crimes can be punished.
 - To call for the protection of religious minorities such as the Yazidis, the Alawites, and the Christians. There have to be measures to secure freedom of belief in Afrin – and it will be necessary to try and prevent and to condemn the destruction of shrines of the Yazidis and the Alawites, as well as the destruction of the graves of the people from Afrin who tried to defend the region.
 - To call for special protection of the women of the region, and there have to be measures to restore full equality between men and women.
 - To call for an end of the spread of radical Islam in Afrin by Turkey and the Syrian opposition.
 - To call for help for the Kurds in restoring the autonomous self-government throughout the Afrin region and in trying to protect the Kurdish identity of the Afrin region. An ethnic cleansing by Turkey must be prevented.
 - To call for helping to prepare and carry out free and democratic elections in the autonomous region of Afrin.
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