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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

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.

[03 June 2020]

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

The Republic of Turkey: Dealing with dissenters and minorities

In mid-April 2020, the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) passed a law allowing the release of tens of thousands of prisoners – as a means of reducing the risk of a massive COVID-19 outbreak in the country's overcrowded and unhygienic prisons. However, political prisoners who were detained under the so-called "anti-terror laws" – including many members of the Kurdish but also of the Alevi ethnic group – were largely excluded from this. Several contact persons of the Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) confirmed that three prisoners had already died of COVID-19 when the law was passed, and about 70 members of the security staff had tested positive for the virus.

In early May 2020, a former soldier of the Turkish armed forces reported on public executions of members of the Kurdish ethnic group, committed by the Turkish military. The soldier, who wanted to remain anonymous for safety reasons, stated that he was stationed in the border area with Iran for his military service in 2009 and 2010. Further, he stated that Kurdish people were generally treated as outlaws at the border. During his military service, he witnessed the death of several civilians, including children, and there were executions under the guise of "fighting terrorism". Instead of entering a dialogue with the Kurdish population of the country in order to work out a peaceful and just solution to the Kurdish question, the Republic of Turkey insisted on a military solution, thus tolerating human rights violations and war crimes.

This summer, the historic Monastery of Soumela on the eastern coast of the Black Sea will not be open to tourists, let alone for church services. It was supposed to reopen in May 2020 after five years of closure under the pretext of construction work. The opening will now be postponed indefinitely. Further, a planned visit of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. to celebrate the Assumption of the Virgin Mary on August 15, 2020, was prohibited.

Further in the southeast of the Republic of Turkey, in the early Christian area of Tur Abdin, there are no signs of improvement regarding the situation of the Aramaic-speaking Syrian Orthodox Christian community. On January 9, 2020, at six in the morning, armed Turkish police officers arrived at the Syrian Orthodox monastery Mor Yakoub in south-east Anatolia. They arrested the abbot Dayroyo Aho (43). The relatives of the detained clergy were in fear for several days. He is threatened with a 15-year prison sentence in the worst case. The monk is said to have given shelter and food to the fighters of the Kurdish underground organization PKK. In addition to Mr. Aho, two other Christians, Josef Yar, mayor of the Aramaic village of Arkah, and the Syrian Orthodox Christian Musa Taştekin, were arrested.

Recently, another Yazidi cemetery was desecrated, in the village of Mezre in the southeast of the Republic of Turkey. Unknown persons had damaged several gravestones in the Yazidi village cemetery at the end of March 2020, destroying several religious symbols. The cemetery, located not far from the village, is still used by people of Yazidi faith for the burial of relatives. In the Republic of Turkey, members of the Yazidi community are frequently attacked by members of the Muslim population. Further, Yazidi landowners are often not allowed to cultivate their lands.

In connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Alevi religious community also fears for members of the community who are currently detained. In the prisons of the Republic of Turkey, they are denied pastoral consultation with an Alevi cleric. The Alevi religious community demands the right to pastoral care meetings with an "Ana" or a "Dede", a female or a male clergyman. There are 14 to 20 million people of the Alevi faith living in Turkey. They have been fighting against discrimination and demanding recognition of Alevism as a religious community for many years.

Society for Threatened Peoples therefore calls upon the UN Human Rights Council to urge the Government of the Republic of Turkey to:

- release all political prisoners, detained journalists, and politicians,
- lift all restrictions on the freedom of expression and the freedom of the press and respect all international standards,
- stop using the penal code and the Turkish anti-terrorism laws for the oppression of minorities or to restrict the freedom of expression,
- immediately stop criminalization of citizens on the basis of critical reporting or peaceful expression of opinion,
- no longer classify discussions regarding the recognition of national rights for members of the Kurdish, Alevi, and Yazidi communities and other ethnic and religious communities such as the Assyrian/Aramaic or Armenian ethnic groups in the print and digital media and elsewhere as "terrorist propaganda"; Media professionals, politicians, and others must have the right to express their views on the political situation of the country freely and without fear.

