

International Peace Delegation Imrali 2021

"We no longer want dead bodies delivered to our doorsteps."

We, the undersigned participants in the *International Peace Delegation Imrali 2021*, have now concluded a two-day mission in Turkey which this time was virtual due to the Covid pandemic.

Our "visit" was in the tradition of former Imrali delegations who have gone to Turkey in recent years in support of the reopening of the peace process between the Turkish authorities and the Kurdish leadership, which was abruptly ended in 2015. We want to emphasize our clear understanding that the absolute precondition for this process to be resumed is that the isolation of Abdullah Öcalan in Imrali prison be ended.

Prior to our meetings we had written to the Turkish Minister of Justice, Mr. Abdulhamit Gül, asking his assistance in arranging that our delegation be given permission to visit Abdullah Öcalan on Imrali Island virtually. We also requested a virtual meeting with the Minister. So far there has been no response.

In our fact-finding endeavour we had meetings with representatives of human rights organizations, trade unions, women's organization, lawyers associations, solidarity bodies with prisoners, political parties and representatives of Abdullah Öcalan's legal team.

The delegation intends to publish a report on its findings in due course but wants nevertheless to emphasize the following now that the visit is over:

In the light of a marked deterioration of human rights now evident in Turkey—and this applies to all the fields we covered—conditions in prisons, women's rights, trade union rights, political rights - it was strongly felt by those we met, that the international community was turning a blind eye to these alarming developments.

International conventions on human rights are broken in society and in the prisons in particular, as has been established by the Council of Europe. This was clearly stated in a report published by the Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) in August last year after a visit to Imrali Island in May 2019. The CPT said that the Turkish authorities were "*without further delay*" to "*carry out a complete overhaul of the detention regime applied to prisoners sentenced to aggravated life imprisonment in Turkish prisons...*" On receipt of this report, the Permanent Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe approved it.

The Turkish authorities have not only ignored these demands, they have in fact deepened and aggravated the isolation of Imrali. Since April 22nd, 2020 there has been no contact whatsoever with Abdullah Öcalan. With regard to this, the CPT Committee has to account for why, on its recent visit to Turkey in January this year, it did not demand to visit Imrali Island and thus show indignation about its recommendations being so contemptuously ignored. Neither did the CPT meet with Öcalan's lawyers nor his family.

No less serious was seen the recent visit of the President of the Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg to Turkey in September last year, where he received an honorary medal in Istanbul University, the very place where purges of academics had been greatest. Acceptance of honours by the President of the Court of Human Rights under such circumstances, seriously compromises the Court's independence and neutrality. To further add to this partisan behaviour, and thus still undermining the reputation of the Court, was the President's meeting with government "trustees" who had forcibly replaced democratically elected mayors.

We learned about how women's organizations had been closed down and women's social rights restricted. We were told grueling stories of individual women being abused and raped often by uniformed authority. We were given evidence of increased brutality in the prisons, the way lawyers and trade unionists were being persecuted and political rights eroded; how kidnappings and disappearances by the police were common place; how dangerous criminals, but not political prisoners, were being released from prison because of the pandemic; how every act of democratic dissent is being reframed as terrorism.

One of our participants summed up the desperate nature of the situation: *"We no longer want dead bodies delivered to our doorsteps."*

We are also concerned by the hunger-strike spreading in the last 80 days in Turkish prisons, in protest against the "Imrali regime". If the Turkish government does not respond, this could turn into a dangerous fast unto death, and must be avoided.

Again and again, our interlocutors linked the deterioration of human rights across the country to the intensification of the regime of isolation on Mr. Öcalan. *"The Imrali system,"* they contend, *"has not only spilled over to other prisons but in fact spread throughout all of society."* Such extension of the Imrali system of isolation signifies the institutionalization of a dictatorship. The Constitution is not applied, the laws of Turkey are not applied, international law is not applied, international court decisions are not applied. Instead, impunity, tyranny, are the order of the day. While the international community stands by, for the most part, silently. And silence is complicity.

We call for an end to this silence and complicity, and, indeed, for an overhaul of economic, trade, military and diplomatic relations with Turkey.

When the prison window in Imrali was opened ajar in May 2019, Abdullah Öcalan said in his message: *"There is an urgent need for a method of democratic negotiations, away from all kinds of polarization and the culture of conflict in the solution of problems. We can solve the problems in Turkey, and even in the region—first and foremost the war—with soft power; that is with intelligence, political and cultural power instead of tools of physical violence."*

These are the words that are being imprisoned on Imrali Island.

Imrali is a microcosm of Turkey. It is both a laboratory for oppression and for human freedoms. Isolation and the lack of human rights in Imrali prison has a bearing on the condition of prisoners throughout the rest of the country. At the same time, Imrali could become a model for human rights in Turkey and beyond, because Abdullah Öcalan's ideas are important for the solution of conflicts throughout the Middle East and indeed the world in general.

All facts and testimonies are clearly suggesting that Imrali has remained a dramatic confirmation of policies of repression, with no signs of assuming its more difficult but certainly much more needed role of finding ways of replacing force and repression with a culture of respect for human rights and democracy.

It is our conviction that, like Nelson Mandela, Abdullah Öcalan is a crucial role player for the construction of a peaceful and democratic resolution to the ongoing conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdish freedom movement. **We thus believe that the time has come not only for an end to the isolation, but in fact for the freedom of Abdullah Öcalan, since, as Nelson Mandela once said, "only free men can negotiate."**

Clare Baker is an international officer for Unite, the union in the UK, and is at present the Secretary of the UK Trade Union Campaign, Freedom for Öcalan.

Baroness Christine Blower is the former General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers in Britain and at present co-chair of the UK trade union campaign, Freedom for Öcalan.

Prof. Radha D'Souza is a critical scholar, social justice activist, barrister and writer from India. She has worked in New Zealand and currently teaches law at the University of Westminster in the UK.

Melanie Gingell is a Barrister and a lecturer on International Human Rights Law and Feminist Legal Theory, has served as a member of the executive of the Bar Human Rights Committee of England and Wales and is a member of the steering committee of *Peace in Kurdistan*.

Rahila Gupta is a freelance journalist, writer and activist. She is a longstanding member of Southall Black Sisters (from 1989), member of Women Defend Rojava UK and patron of Peace in Kurdistan. She writes mostly on race, religion and gender.

Ögmundur Jónasson is former leader of the Public Service Unions in Iceland, was Member of the Icelandic Parliament and served as minister for a number of years, including Minister of Justice. He is Honorary Associate of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Dr. Thomas Jeffrey Miley is a prolific writer and scholar of sociology at the University of Cambridge who has participated in a number of delegations to Turkey and Kurdistan, including Rojava. On this he has published extensively, books and articles. He is a member of the executive board of the EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC).

Laura Quagliuolo is an Italian editor and author of children's schoolbooks, long active in international work, esp. on women's rights. At present she is active in RETE JIN, an Italian net of women in support of the Kurdish women's movement and is part of the committee *Time has come, Freedom for Öcalan*.

Roza Salih is Kurdish, born in South Kurdistan and was a refugee seeking asylum in Scotland in 2001. She has been active in human rights work and is at present a candidate for the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the upcoming elections.

Gianni Tognoni is a medical doctor, has served as the director of research at the Mario Negri institute in Milan and has been the General Secretary of the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal since its founding in 1979. He has frequently been called to work together with the World Health Organization.

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