

Strasbourg, 18 December 2019

To Mr. Josep Borrell,  
HR/VP of the European Commission

Object: Call for immediate action to stop Turkey's attacks on the Kurds at home and in Syria

Mr. Borrell,

We are writing this letter to attract your attention to the repression of democratic political opposition in Turkey, first and foremost the Kurds and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), and the Turkish invasion in Northern Syria, in particular the regions (Rojava) inhabited by Kurds and Christian Assyrians. We would like to request the Commission to take immediate and concrete steps to end this unlawful repression and the invasion.

Over the last four years, President Erdoğan's ruling AKP has gradually built an extremely authoritarian political system with the help of its ultranationalist allies and under conditions of emergency rule. In this process, over 80,000 people were arrested with terrorism related charges, including political leaders, members of parliament, elected Kurdish mayors, hundreds of journalists, academics, physicians, civil society representatives, human rights activists, and many more. The government has typically blamed anybody critical of its policies, particularly its Kurdish policy, as a terrorist, a traitor or an enemy of the state. Although emergency rule was formally lifted in July 2018, in practice there is a permanent emergency rule in the country. The "Turkish-type presidential system" has totally undermined the principle of separation of powers and an independent judiciary.

The Turkish government seeks to completely destroy the HDP, the second biggest opposition party in the country that played a central role in the defeat of President Erdoğan both in June 2015 general elections and in the local elections held on 31 March 2019. It has been carrying out incessant assaults on the HDP since July 2015. In this process, over 15,300 thousand HDP administrators, members and sympathizers were taken into custody and over 5,000 of them arrested with groundless terrorism-related charges, including HDP's former co-chairs Mr. Selahattin Demirtaş and Ms. Figen Yüksekdağ, seven other former members of parliament, over fifty elected Kurdish mayors, and countless party administrators and members.

Turkish government is particularly aggressive towards the HDP-run Kurdish municipalities. Under the emergency rule (July 2016- July 2018) the government had removed and arrested close to one hundred elected Kurdish co-mayors and replaced them with appointed Turkish governors as "trustees." Emergency rule formally ended in 2018, but the unlawful trustee-rule did not. In the run-up to the 31

March 2019 municipal elections, 50 Kurdish co-mayors were still in prison, 29 of whom under pre-trial arrest for about three years. After the local elections of 31 March 2019, attacks on the HDP municipality were reactivated: Since 19 August 2019, 28 Kurdish co-mayors were removed from office and replaced with appointed governors, again with groundless terrorism related charges, including Kurdish greater municipalities of Diyarbakır, Mardin and Van, and 19 co-mayors were arrested. 6 other co-mayors were denied their election certificates after the elections because they had previously been dismissed from their jobs with emergency rule government decrees. That makes a total of 34 municipalities unlawfully seized by the Turkish government. Those co-mayors who are not yet removed from office work under tremendous political and financial pressures from the government and with the constant fear that they may be removed and arrested anytime.

Even a number European citizens got victims of political repression and Turkey uses formal and informal structures in Europe to expand its repressive policy against the democratic and Kurdish opposition inside the Turkish and Kurdish communities in Europe.

Another important issue that requires your immediate attention is the situation of sick prisoners in Turkey. According to the Human Rights Association of Turkey (IHD), there were 1025 sick prisoners in Turkey in 2018, and many of them being political 357 of these sick prisoners are heavily ill and they need to be released or treated in well-equipped hospitals. On 26 November 2019, Mr Selahattin Demirtaş lost consciousness due to chest tightness and inability to breathe. Mr. Demirtaş requested being transferred to a well-equipped hospital for comprehensive medical tests and treatment. Despite the fact that the prison doctor also requested his immediate transfer to three separate departments (cardiology, neurology and gastroenterology), he was transferred to the hospital seven days later, and only with pressures from the HDP and the democratic public.

All of these pressures on the Kurds and the HDP are happening in parallelism with Turkey's attacks on the Kurds in Northern Syria, who defeated the ISIS with the help of the International Coalition. Turkey and its extremist proxy forces, many of them former members of Al-Qaeda and ISIS related groups, had invaded the Kurdish region of Afrin in early 2018. The about 150.000 IDPs who fled the Turkish invasion were prevented to return to their homes. Instead of the original inhabitants of the region Turkey settled Arab refugees from other parts of Syria. This is a systematic demographic engineering that is a severe violation of international law. The remaining Kurdish population and especially the religious minorities like Yazidis, Christians and Alevi suffer under violence and repression by the Turkish proxies that include extremist Islamists and Jihadists. While Kurdish was dismissed as an official language and as language of education, Arab and Turkish are used as official languages now. Concrete steps towards an annexation were set, like the employment of Turkish policemen or the establishment of a Turkish Post office in Afrin.

On 9 October 2019, Turkey initiated another invasion into the predominantly Kurdish regions of Syria, controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This invasion violates the international law and commits countless atrocities and crimes against humanity against civilians. Again the Kurdish and Christian inhabitants of the newly occupied territories around Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn/Sere Kaniye had to flee. Although a ceasefire was announced with Russian mediation the attacks of the Turkish army and its proxies continue, especially against the Christian-Assyrian town of Tal Tamer.

Parallel to the attacks against North-Eastern Syria also the IDPs from Afrin, who remain in a region around Tal Rifaat that is jointly controlled by the Syrian government and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). To give just one example, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, on 2 December 2019 Turkish artillery shelling landed near a school in Tal Rifaat and killed at least ten people, eight of whom were children between the ages of three and fifteen.

While Turkey tries to justify this unprovoked aggression towards the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Kurdish, Christian and Arab civilians in northern Syria as a "fight against terrorism," it is clear to us that Turkey's actual aim is to destroy the possibility of an autonomous self-administration for the local population in Syria, displacing the Kurds, Assyrians, Syrians and Armenians along the Turkish-Syrian border, and relocating Arab and Turkic populations and families of its Jihadist proxies into Kurdish territories. During the invasions in 2018 and 2019, about 350,000 Kurds and Christians (Assyrians, Syrians and Armenians) were displaced, who now live under terrible conditions in camps. Displacing

Kurds and Christians and relocating Arab populations in their territories is a blatant policy of demographic engineering and ethnic cleansing – both crimes against humanity. Turkey is committing these crimes before the watching eyes of the international community as a member of the NATO, a member of the Council of Europe, and a candidate country in the process of accession to the EU.

We ask you to step up against the ethnic cleansing against the Kurdish and Christian population of Northern Syria and the Turkish occupation of this region! With a united stand of the European Union, that must include a complete arms embargo against Turkey, economic sanctions and targeted sanctions against several members of the Turkish government, Turkey could be forced to leave Syria. We also ask you to support the humanitarian efforts for the displaced persons in North-Eastern Syria and in the Tal Rifaat region by the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) and not to support any attempts to settle Syrians from other parts of Syria or non-Syrians in the Turkish occupied territories of Syria.

To conclude, we reaffirm the need for the Kurdish authorities to be involved in the discussions to come, in order to restore peace and stability in this part of the world, and in particular allow for the reconstruction of a democratic Syria.

Respectfully,

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