

European body criticizes prison conditions in Turkey

Thu, 2020-08-06 20:22

ISTANBUL: Prison conditions and police brutality in Turkey have been criticized by the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT).

Overcrowding in prisons prompted the Turkish government to adopt an amnesty law in April that led to the release of 90,000 inmates – including mafia bosses – but not those convicted on terror charges.

However, the problem has persisted with a steady increase in the prison population, according to two CPT reports, released on Aug. 5.

The criticisms by the European body are based on its periodic visits to several prisons throughout the country and on interviews with hundreds of people who were held in police custody.

The European delegation examined several personal testimonies about excessive use of force and physical ill-treatment by gendarmerie officers and police forces during custody. Former detainees said that they were kicked, punched and slapped by police who wanted them to provide more information or give confessions.

"Numerous detained persons claimed to have been subjected to threats and/or severe verbal abuse. Moreover, a number of allegations were once again received about excessive use of force and/or physical ill-treatment by members of the mobile motorcycle intervention teams in Istanbul," the report said.

"In a number of cases, the allegations of physical ill-treatment were supported by medical evidence, such as bodily injuries documented in medical records or directly observed by medical members of the delegation," the report added.

The Council of Europe reiterated its call to the Turkish government to implement its "zero tolerance policy to the ill-treatment" and to alleviate concerns about legal restrictions on access to a lawyer during the initial phase of police custody for certain serious crimes.

Ozturk Turkdogan, president of the Human Rights Association (IHD), said that Turkey was also obliged to open its prisons to civil monitoring by Turkish-based human rights groups.

"So far, only CPT and the ministry are entitled to inspect the prisons' physical conditions, undermining transparency and preventing immediate precautions during the pandemic conditions," he told Arab News.

Another area of criticism is the flawed system of mandatory medical

examinations for newly arrived prisoners, as well as the lack of beds for a large number of inmates in the prisons – obliging them to sleep on mattresses on the floor due to overcrowding.

Philanthropist, businessperson and human rights activist, Osman Kavala, recently marked his 1,000th day of imprisonment on July 27 although the Council of Europe has often called for his immediate release.

Last December, jailed Kurdish politician, Selahattin Demirtas, who has a history of coronary issues, was taken to hospital for health checks after collapsing in his prison cell. Family members claimed that the authorities refused to carry out full checks and detailed examinations for emergency treatment.

According to Turkdogan, prisons are still overpopulated as their capacity even with the planned construction of new facilities is only suitable to accommodate 165,000 inmates, while the current prison population is about 200,000.

“Those convicted for expressing their opinions, as well as juvenile inmates and thousands of children who stay with their mothers in the prison, should be released at first instance to alleviate this overpopulation problem. About 600 inmates who have serious illnesses should also be released,” he said.

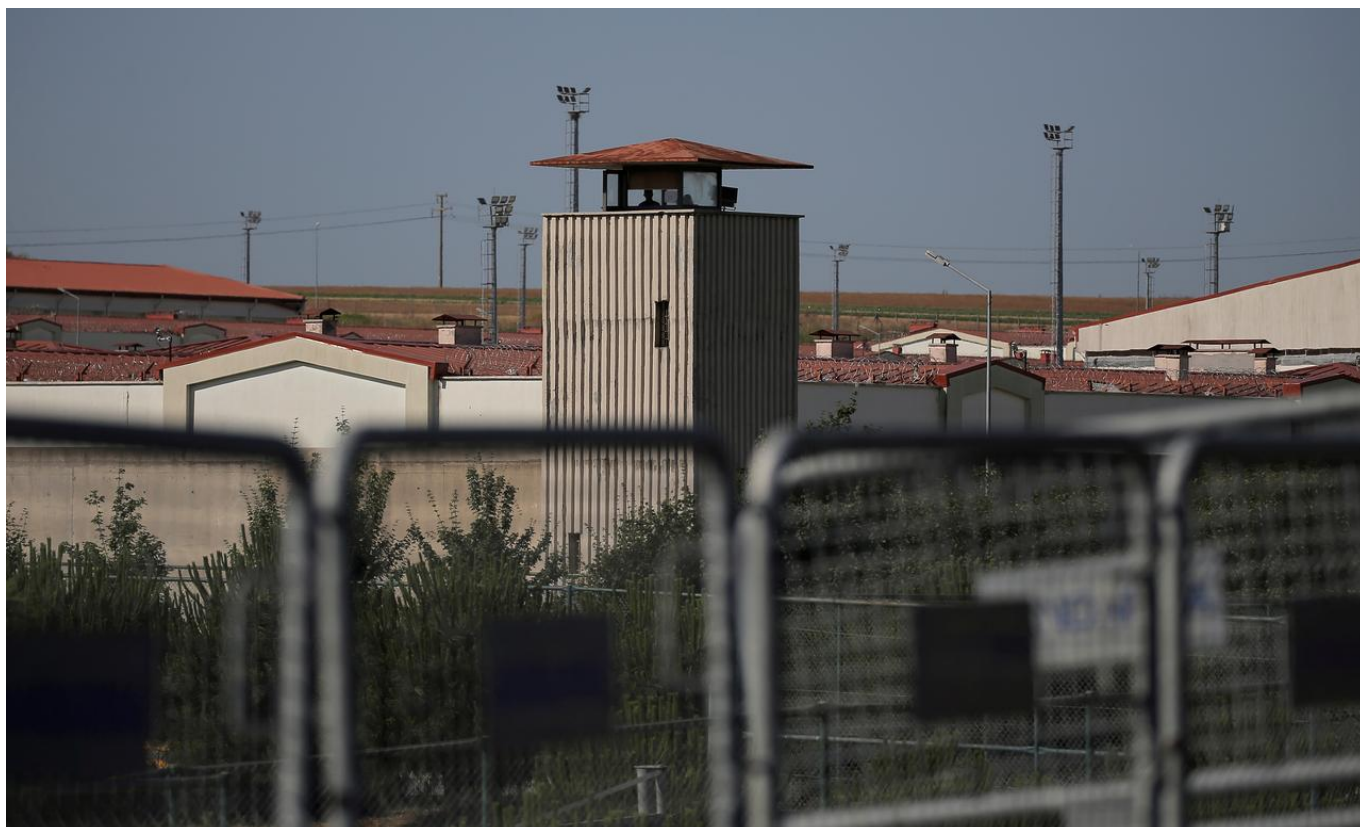
Turkdogan said that allegations of torture should be investigated, and naked screening for inmates as well as handcuffed health monitoring practices should be stopped to protect the dignity of prisoners.

Some inmates, such as Demirtas who is in northwestern Edirne prison 1,600 km from his southeastern hometown Diyarbakir, are kept far from their families. Turkdogan said that this was also a violation of rights.

“They need to keep their contacts with their families. But when you put an inmate in a city situated miles away from the place of residence or from the city where the crime is committed, it complicates the lives of the relatives as well,” he said.

On the basis of photos, videos and legal and medical documents about the incidents examined, Human Rights Watch also released a report last week claiming that “Turkish police and “night watchmen” have committed serious abuses against at least 14 people in six incidents in Diyarbakir and Istanbul in the past two months.

Politicians from the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) have regularly submitted written parliamentary questions regarding torture or ill-treatment in Turkey, but the questions mostly remain unanswered by the interior and justice ministries.



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Contagion risk in Turkish prisons feared
Three Turkish prisoners die of coronavirus

[US Iran envoy Brian Hook standing down, Elliott Abrams to take on the role](#)

Thu, 2020-08-06 20:13

WASHINGTON: Iran envoy Brian Hook is leaving his post and US Venezuela envoy Elliott Abrams will add Iran to his role "following a transition period" with Hook, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Thursday.

Hook's departure comes as the United Nations Security Council prepares to vote next week on a U.S. bid to extend an international arms embargo on Iran. Some diplomats have said the measure lacks support.

I thank Special Representative Brian Hook for his 3+ years of service to the State Department and [@realDonaldTrump](#) as he moves on to the private sector. He has been a valued member of my leadership team.

– Secretary Pompeo (@SecPompeo) [August 6, 2020](#)

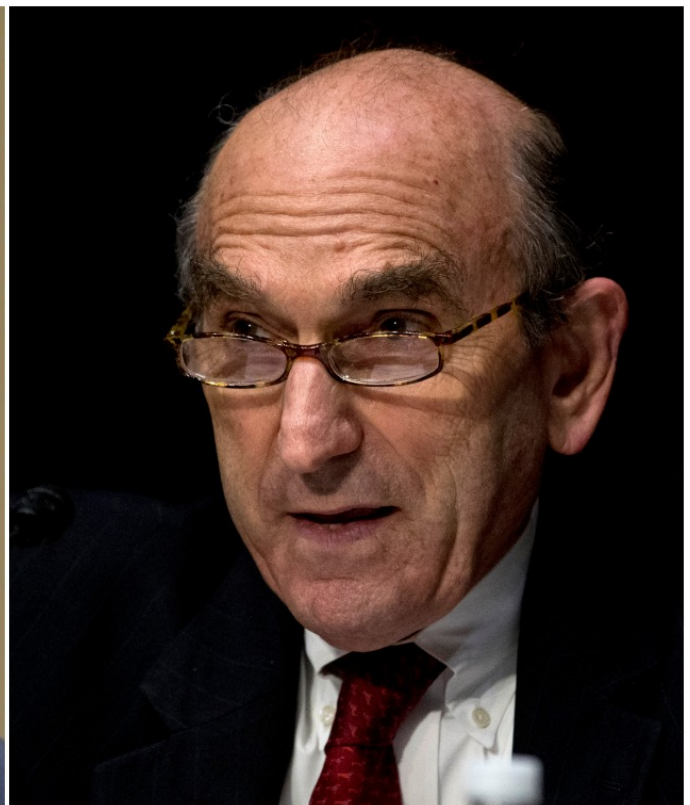
Pompeo did not give a reason for Hook's decision to leave. It was not immediately clear when Hook would finish, but the announcement comes at a crucial time for U.S. diplomacy on Iran.

If the United States is unsuccessful in extending the arms embargo on Iran, it has threatened to trigger a return of all UN sanctions under a process – known as snapback – agreed in the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers.

Some diplomats have suggested the United States will likely start the snapback process, which could take up to 30 days, by the end of August.

Abrams, a Republican foreign policy veteran, was named US special representative for Venezuela in January of last year and has led a hardline approach aimed at ousting Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro.

US officials have said privately that President Donald Trump has been frustrated by the failure to remove Maduro, who retains the support of the Venezuelan military, as well from Russia, China, Cuba and Iran.



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US is pushing to stop Iranian funding to Houthis: Brian Hook Sanctions on Iran have produced 'excellent results' says Brian Hook

[Beirut wakes up to a nightmare after port explosion kills 135](#)

Thu, 2020-08-06 02:01

BEIRUT: Most people experience nightmares only when they sleep. On Wednesday, Beirut woke up to one.

The once bustling port area of the Lebanese capital, the site of Tuesday's massive explosions, lay in ruins. Amid the flattened remains of warehouses, one of which had been used for years to store 2,750 tonnes of confiscated, highly explosive ammonium nitrate, all that remained standing was the twisted, mangled ruin of a grain silo, its precious contents now unusable.

Farther into the city, where the shock wave from the main blast caused devastation over a radius of more than five kilometers, residents mourned the dead, continued to search for missing loved ones and surveyed the ruins of their homes and businesses.

Beirut Governor Marwan Abboud estimated the cost of the damage at up to \$15 billion, an impossible amount for an already bankrupt economy. Maroun Helou, the president of the Lebanese Contractors Syndicate, estimated that about 50,000 buildings were destroyed or damaged.

The official death toll rose on Wednesday to 135. More than 5,000 people were injured and dozens are still missing, many of them believed to be port workers buried under the rubble at the heart of the explosion. The Lebanese flag flew at half-staff across the country as a mark of respect for the victims.

Lebanese Red Cross chief George Kettana described the blast and its aftermath as "an unprecedented disaster." He added: "Seventy-five of our ambulances have transported 100 dead and more than 4,000 injured so far and there are (still people) missing."

Surgeons continued to operate on the injured on Wednesday, after hospitals were overwhelmed on Tuesday. Some of the wounded told how they were taken to hospital on motorcycles driven by passers-by because ambulances were unable to reach them.

Security forces cordoned off central Beirut to prevent theft and looting. The few pedestrians that could be seen found it difficult to walk on streets

covered in shattered glass.

One shop owner said: "I experienced all the wars that took place in Beirut, and the attacks against it, but I have never witnessed such devastation in my life. How will we survive? Everything has been destroyed. We are tired. We want salvation."

Eleven members of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, who were on boats anchored at the port, were injured by the blast. They were taken to Sidon for treatment, as emergency departments in Beirut struggled to cope with the flood of wounded. The tourist ship Orient Queen sank in the port. Two crew members were killed and seven injured.

Pierre Ashkar, head of the Syndicate of Hotel Owners in Lebanon, said: "Ninety percent of Beirut's hotels have been damaged and there are large numbers of wounded people in hotels, including employees and customers."

Although silos used for storing wheat – which were rebuilt 15 years ago after suffering damage during the Civil War – were destroyed in the blast, analysts said this is not expected to cause a bread shortage. One expert said: "Wheat will not be stored during reconstruction of the silos. Instead, it will be unloaded from ships directly to trucks that will transport it to the mills."

The Lebanese cabinet, which met for an unscheduled meeting on Wednesday, has declared a state of emergency lasting two weeks, which gives the military the authority to maintain national security. It also ordered that all those responsible for the management, storage, guarding and scrutiny of the chemicals in the warehouse at the port be placed under house arrest, and vowed that those responsible for the explosion would be identified.

While visiting the port to survey the damage, President Michel Aoun said: "The city of Beirut has turned into a disaster city. But the enormity of the shock will not prevent us from carrying out investigations and revealing the circumstances of what happened as soon as possible, holding the officials and inattentive people accountable and imposing the most severe penalties against them."

A senior judge instructed the General Directorate of the Internal Security Forces to carry out swift investigations into the circumstances of the explosion, including identification of those tasked with ensuring the safe storage of the chemicals, and those in charge of maintenance work reportedly being carried out at the warehouse shortly before the blast.

The details of the confiscation of the ammonium nitrate about six years ago are still somewhat unclear. The port's general manager, Hassan Koraytem, said there had been correspondence about the chemicals at the time of the seizure and guards were assigned to them, but that port authorities had no authority to move or dispose of them. He added that the judiciary had issued instructions for a gap in a gate to be closed to protect the chemicals from damage or theft and this was implemented by port authorities.

There have been suggestions that welding work at or near the warehouse caused

a fire that triggered the explosion.

Meanwhile, messages of support and promises of aid poured in from world leaders. The cabinet was informed that French President Emmanuel Macron will visit Lebanon on Thursday to “stress solidarity with the Lebanese in the ordeal that befell them.”

In a call to Prime Minister Hassan Diab, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pledged “the support of the United States for Lebanon, and its willingness to provide urgent assistance,” the PM’s office said.

Former Prime Minister Saad Hariri also visited the scene of the explosion. He was greeted at the nearby memorial to his father, Rafic Hariri, by protesters tried to throw stones at him.

Meanwhile dozens of aircraft loaded with medical aid, including field hospitals, were sent to Lebanon by Arab and other foreign countries.

However, Suleiman Haroun, the president of the Syndicate of Private Hospitals, said: “The stock of medical supplies for hospitals is exhausted. We do not need field hospitals, but rather tools and supplies.”



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We feel your pain: Saudi Arabia’s support for devastated Beirut
Fear of food shortages after Beirut explosion hits grain reserves

Turkey considering quitting treaty on violence against women

Author:

Thu, 2020-08-06 01:32

ISTANBUL: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling AK Party is considering whether to pull Turkey out of an international accord designed to protect women, party officials said, alarming campaigners who see the pact as key to combating rising domestic violence.

The officials said the AKP is set to decide by next week whether to withdraw from the deal, just weeks after the vicious murder of a woman by an ex-boyfriend reignited a row over how to curb violence against women.

Despite signing the Council of Europe accord in 2011, pledging to prevent, prosecute and eliminate domestic violence and promote equality, Turkey saw 474 femicides last year, double the number seen in 2011, according to a group which monitors murders of women.

Many conservatives in Turkey say the pact, ironically forged in Istanbul, encourages violence by undermining family structures. Their opponents argue that the deal, and legislation approved in its wake, need to be implemented more stringently. The row reaches not just within Erdogan's AKP but even his own family, with two of his children involved in groups on either side of the debate about the Istanbul Convention.

The AKP will decide in the next week whether to initiate legal steps to pull out of the accord, a senior party official told Reuters.

"There is a small majority (in the party) who argue it is right to withdraw," said the official, who argued however that abandoning the agreement when violence against women was on the rise would send the wrong signals.

Another AKP official argued on the contrary that the way to reduce the violence was to withdraw, adding that a decision would be reached next week. The argument crystallized last month around the brutal killing of Pinar Gultekin, 27, a student in the southwestern province of Mugla, who was strangled, burned and dumped in a barrel – the latest in a growing number of women killed by men in Turkey.

Opponents of the accord say it is part of the problem because it undermines traditional values which protect society.

"It is our religion which determines our fundamental values, our view of the family," said the Turkish Youth Foundation, whose advisory board includes the president's son Bilal Erdogan. It called for Turkey to withdraw from the accord.

"This would really break Turkey away from the civilized world and the consequences may be very severe," Gamze Tascier, a lawmaker from the main

opposition Republican People's Party, told Reuters.

The Women and Democracy Association (KADEM), of which Erdogan's daughter Sumeyye is deputy chairwoman, rejects that argument. "We can no longer talk about 'family'... in a relationship where one side is oppressed and subject to violence," KADEM said.

Many conservatives are also hostile to the principle of gender equality in the Istanbul Convention and see it as promoting homosexuality, given its principle of non-discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation.

Critics of the bid to withdraw from the pact say it would put Turkey further out of step with the values of the EU, which it has sought to join for decades.

"This would really break Turkey away from the civilized world and the consequences may be very severe," Gamze Tascier, a lawmaker from the main opposition Republican People's Party, told Reuters.

Turkey would not be the first country to move toward ditching the accord. Poland's highest court is to scrutinize the pact after a Cabinet member said Warsaw should quit the treaty which the nationalist government considers too liberal.

Turkish women's groups were set to protest on Wednesday to demand better implementation of the accord, taking to the streets after an online campaign in the wake of Gultekin's killing where they shared black-and-white selfies on Instagram.

Turkey does not keep official statistics on femicide. World Health Organization data has shown 38 percent of women in Turkey are subject to violence from a partner in their lifetime, compared to about 25 percent in Europe.

The government has taken measures such as tagging individuals known to resort to violence and creating a smartphone app for women to alert police, which has been downloaded hundreds of thousands of times.



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Turkish women's anger as doubts grow over domestic violence treaty Fears of infections spike as Turkey's public ignores measures during Eid

[How COVID-19 precautions may have averted a higher Beirut toll](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-08-06 01:15

BEIRUT: The new glass-fronted buildings in the Beirut port area housed the offices of many media and business enterprises. But all that remained after Tuesday night's massive explosions were concrete mounds and twisted steel.

The final casualty figures are still unknown, with many missing and the wounded still not counted. The toll could have been much higher, but for two factors: Summer working hours and remote work.

Many employees finished work at 3 p.m. and many others were working from home as part of the precautionary and preventive measures against COVID-19. Those

who were in the vicinity have harrowing tales.

In one of those modern buildings, the editorial and technical support team of An-Nahar newspaper had gathered to launch their newest project, An-Nahar Al-Arabi.

"We were in a hall in the upper floor about to end the celebrations and editors of the newspaper's print edition had started to enter the building when we heard the first explosion," said journalist Rana Najjar, who suffered minor head injuries.

"The port is opposite our offices and some of us had started to take pictures when we saw the fire. Then a huge explosion followed. Some of us ran under the desks or scrambled farther in search of safety. Others were stuck in their offices as the ceiling collapsed. Shards of broken glass injured many."

The newspaper was still maintaining a limited-staff schedule because of the pandemic, according to Najjar.

"Casualties could have been much higher if all the employees were present in the building," she told Arab News. "We could not head to the stairways and get out of the building right away because of the extensive damage. Once outside, we started helping the injured."

Fifteen colleagues were seriously injured, with others suffering slight wounds, Najjar said.

"A security officer next to Al-Jurdiya building was seriously injured, while a Syrian man set out to search for his brother who was repairing the water tank on the rooftop. I stopped passing cars and motorcycles to send the wounded to the hospitals."

Najjar found a colleague, Salwa Baalbaki, with a dislocated shoulder and serious hand injuries. "I stopped a motorcyclist and told him to take her to the hospital," Najjar recalled. "I found an Ethiopian girl bleeding from the head and started helping her."

The journalist then drove to the hospital emergency room in her own car to seek treatment for her own injuries.

Journalist Ibrahim Haidar, also of An-Nahar, who suffered injuries to the head and face, said he was at his desk writing when he heard the first explosion.

"I got up and went to report to the local desk what I saw," he told Arab News. "As I was returning to my desk, another massive explosion tore everything apart."

Once outside the building, a motorcyclist stopped to pick up Haidar. "I did not ride behind him because I started to get dizzy. Another man took me in his car to the AUB Medical Hospital, but it was full of injured people," he said.

"I then went to CMC Hospital, which refused to treat my wounds. So I went to Khoury Hospital, where I found 200 people waiting for treatment. They stitched my head wounds and asked me to go home. Two hours later, I started bleeding again, so I went back to the hospital for more stitches."

Haidar said the newspaper management decided in March to let employees work from home because of the pandemic. "Two months ago, we returned to the office, but the website employees kept working from home. Hence they avoided this disaster," he said.

Amjad Iskandar, head of the Beirut office of Independent Arabia, said remote work saved many lives and protected completed assignments on home computers.

Ahmed Al-Maghrabi, also of Independent Arabia, was more emphatic: "Thank you, coronavirus."

Employees at companies that keep Lebanon's service economy ticking had similar experiences.

Medgulf Insurance Co., which employs 300 people, has offices in two buildings near the port. "We used to stay at work until 6 p.m. before the hours got reduced because of the pandemic," Ashraf Bakkar, the company's chief underwriter, told Arab News.

"Many of us work from home. Those in the office on Tuesday decided to leave work at 4 p.m., shutting down the server and keeping one employee on stand-by duty. Luckily for him, at the time of the explosion, he was in the bathroom. Had he been at his desk, he would be dead or at least seriously injured."

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