

Reporters Without Borders

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Europe & ex-USSR - Turkey

News blackout

Journalists under pressure as government pursues military offensive against PKK

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Pressure is mounting on journalists in eastern Turkey as the government intensifies its military offensive against the armed separatists of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), an offensive that is spilling over into neighbouring countries.

As well as a spate of trials and cases of prolonged detention, journalists are now the target of government directives. Journalists who cover Kurdish issues critically continue to be accused of supporting the separatists by officials who cite the war on terror as their overriding imperative. And concern is growing that the government is trying to control coverage of its offensive.

Jailed for an interview?

The Turkish judicial system continues to treat the publication of interviews with PKK members as terrorist propaganda, even if they are accompanied by commentary that stops far short of praising the PKK.

Nese Düzel, a journalist with the liberal daily *Taraf*, and his editor, **Adnan Demir**, for example, are being prosecuted for two April 2010 reports containing interviews with former PKK leaders Zübeyir Aydar and Remzi Kartal. A prosecutor asked an Istanbul court on 14 October to sentence them to seven and a half years in prison. The next hearing in their trial is to be held on 9 December.

Prosecutors at the same court are preparing to try [the journalist Ertugrul Mavioglu](#) over a report in *Radikal* in October 2010 that contained an interview with Murat Karayilan, one of the leaders of the Union of Kurdistan Communities (KCK), regarded as PKK's urban wing.

A seven-and-a-half-year sentence has also been requested for **Recep Okuyucu**, *Taraf's* correspondent in the southeastern province of Batman and editor of the local newspaper *Batman Medya*. The prosecutor's office in the nearby city of Diyarbakir claims that he connected 53,848 times to the *Firat News Agency* website (www.firatnews.org), which the authorities have blocked because they accuse it of relaying PKK propaganda. Okuyucu's defence is that, as a journalist, he has to check a wide range of websites every day.

Widespread use of pre-trial detention

Tayyip Temel, a columnist and former managing editor of the Kurdish-language daily *Azadiya Welat*, was detained and taken into custody on 4 October in Diyarbakir. He was questioned for 15 hours by special prosecutors, who also questioned 35 other people suspected of belonging to the KCK.

Charges were finally presented at the end of September against two journalists with the pro-Kurdish news agency *Diha* (*Dicle Haber Ajansi*) – **Kadri Kaya**, its Diyarbakir bureau chief, and **Erdogan Alkan**, its Batman correspondent – who have been held since 15 April and will appear in court for the first time on 2 November in Diyarbakir.





They are facing a possible 20-year jail sentence on charges of collaborating with the PKK and publishing propaganda on its behalf in their coverage of Kurdish demonstrations and Turkish army operations. Alkan is also accused in connection with his coverage of the trial of a "village guard" (member of a militia that supports the army) on a charge of sexually abusing a minor in Batman. According to prosecutors, his coverage aimed to "denigrate the security forces in society's eyes."

Diha's correspondent in Mersin, **Aydin Yıldız**, was arrested on 1 October as he was leaving the headquarters of the pro-Kurdish daily [Özgür Gündem](#). He was transferred to Gaziantep for questioning and then placed in detention, as was *Özgür Gündem* editor **Kazım Seker**, who was arrested on 4 October in Istanbul.

The newspaper's publisher, **Eren Keskin**, who is also a lawyer, was meanwhile given a warning by the Istanbul bar association for referring to "Kurdistan" in a lecture she gave in 2004. The warning was issued following a May 2010 decision by Turkey's highest court of appeal upholding the 10-month suspended prison sentence and fine of 3,000 lira (1,200 euros) that she had received from a court in the southeastern city of Urfa.

In an interview for *Radikal* on 11 October, the minister in charge of negotiations with the European Union, Egemen Bağış, said that the government was concerned about the judicial system's excessive use of pre-trial detention and that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had asked officials to look at how it was used in Europe and to draft recommendations.

"Limiting the use of pre-trial detention has long been one of our leading recommendations to the Turkish authorities," Reporters Without Borders said. "We hail this initiative by the government, which could mark a turning point. The promises must now be followed by action, action that affects all of Turkey's regions."

Coverage of demonstrations criminalized

After 10 months in pre-trial detention, **Emine Altinkaya**, a *Diha* reporter in Ankara, was released at the end of September pending trial. She was arrested on 27 November 2010 while covering a demonstration in the capital.

Two *Diha* correspondents in Istanbul, **Safiye Alagas** and **Olcay Kizilpınar**, are also due to be tried soon on charges of collaborating with the PKK. They were arrested during a march on 30 July that was organized by Sirri Süreyya Önder, the candidate of a legal pro-Kurdish party, the BDP. Cameras, mobile phones, SIM cards, USB flash drives and a laptop were confiscated from them at the time of their arrest and are still being held as prosecution evidence.

Government directives to the media

Several Turkish journalists' organizations have voiced strong criticism of Prime Minister Erdoğan's meeting with national media owners and executives on 21 October, at which Erdoğan urged journalists to show restraint in their coverage of the conflict, to take account of its consequences and to avoid relaying PKK propaganda.



Even more disturbing is the [communiqué](#) that five leading Turkish news agencies – AA, AHT, ANKA, CIHAN and IHA – issued jointly on 24 October announcing that, "Common principles have been adopted concerning the coverage of terrorist incidents."

They said they had undertaken to "take account of public order (...) keep a distance from interpretations that encourage fear, chaos hostility, panic or intimidation (...) not include propaganda for illegal organizations" and, above all, to "comply with the publication bans issued by the competent authorities." The communiqué also said: "Account will be taken of social utility and solidarity when selecting reports and photos for transmission to subscribers."

"We had hoped that the era of government directives telling the media how to cover the most sensitive subjects was long over in Turkey," Reporters Without Borders said. "The very vaguely formulated undertaking by the leading news agencies to toe the official line now poses a serious threat to freedom of information."

"Will these agencies, whose job is to provide content to all the media, willingly participate in a news blackout? Minimizing the scale of human losses or choosing not to report certain operations will just increase mistrust of the media. Complete and objective coverage of developments in eastern Turkey is an essential precondition for reaching a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue."



Reporters Without Borders also has concerns about the [security agreement](#) which France and Turkey signed on 7 October and which, according to French interior minister Claude Guéant, "goes much further than the agreements that France usually signs in the security domain."

"We hope that the French authorities will be much more discriminating than their Turkish counterparts as regards combating terrorism," Reporters Without Borders said. "We urge them not to be sucked in by Ankara's indiscriminate and repressive approach, which causes many collateral victims, including journalists."

(Picture: Mustafa Ozer/ AFP)
