

Turkey's IPI National Committee Joins Other Turkish Media Organisations in Launch of Campaign against Imprisonment of Journalists Over 700 Turkish Journalists Currently Facing Lawsuits, with Threat of Prison, IPI Turkey National Committee Says

By Louise Hallman, IPI Press Freedom Advisor for Europe

The South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO) would like to announce the following:

Vienna, 1 September 2010 - IPI's Turkey National Committee on 25 August 2010 joined other Turkish media organisations in the launch of a campaign targeting the use of prison sentences against journalists, and calling for those journalists currently imprisoned to be released. The organisations have all come together under the newly-created Turkish Journalists' Association, in a united bid to improve press freedom in Turkey.

According to statistics from the IPI Turkish National Committee, more than 40 Turkish journalists are currently in prison, awaiting trial, because of their reports or columns in Turkey. Some journalists have been held without conviction for several years. Over 700 more journalists are currently facing law suits, with the threat of imprisonment, under specific articles in the Penal Code, press laws and anti-terror laws.

The Turkish Journalists' Association, which held its first meeting on 18 August 2010, is the first organisation of its kind with such wide participation from the Turkish media. It draws membership from the Turkish Journalists' Union, the Press Council, the Media Ethics Association, the Turkish Journalists' Federation, the Newspaper Owners' Association, the Sports Writers' Association, the Economy Reporters' Association, the Culture, Tourism and Environment Journalists' Association, the Professional Reporters' Association, the Reporters' Union and the IPI Turkish National Committee.

Following the meeting on Wednesday the association established the Freedom for Journalists Platform to monitor issues concerning the freedom of journalists and to keep transgressions against press freedom in the public eye; a council of law will follow up judicial cases concerning press freedom.

IPI Turkey's Chairwoman Ferai Tinc said, "This is the first time in Turkish press history that so many media organisations come together to raise their voices for press freedom. Sending journalists to prison because of their reports and opinions is a real threat to press freedom."

"Press freedom is one of the main pillars of democracy. We want a democratic Turkey and a free press. Today we decided to bring together our forces to free our colleagues who are in prison and to demand from the Turkish government to make adequate adjustments to change this situation."

In an illustration of its commitment to defending press freedom, the IPI Turkish National Committee on 19 August 2010 attended the 77th hearing of the 'Ergenekon' court case, in solidarity with two Turkish tabloid journalists who stand accused of membership of the alleged clandestine, ultra-nationalist organization.

Tuncay Ozkan and Mustafa Balbay, alongside a number of other prominent Turkish persons in politics, the security forces and academia, are accused of being members of the covert 'Ergenekon' network which allegedly planned terrorist attacks in an attempt to provoke a military coup to overthrow the mildly Islamist government. The organisation has been dubbed 'Ergenekon' after a mythical place located in the inaccessible valleys of the Altay Mountains, in central Asia, where Russia, China, Mongolia and Kazakhstan come together, which holds historical importance for Turkish nationalists.

Speaking to IPI Headquarters in Vienna, Secretary of the IPI Turkish National Committee Yurdanur Atadan said that Balbay and Ozkan, along with two other journalists faced unclear charges for their alleged part in the coup, with the indictment running to more than 5,000 pages. Balbay and Ozkan have been held in prison without conviction for three years and have been refused bail on seven occasions. Atadan told IPI Headquarters that she did not know when it was likely the journalists would finally face a full trial or be released.

Speaking on behalf of the journalist organisations present at the hearing, Oktay Eksi, chairman of the Turkish Press Council and a chief columnist at national daily newspaper Hurriyet, said: "We came

here because we think that our colleagues here are lacking their right to a fair trial. We came here to show that we are together with them, to express that we stand for their benefits of the laws as anybody else."

"They are our colleagues, brothers and we decided to come here because we think that supporting their rights is a prime task for us. Our decision includes all the journalists whose freedom is restricted."

IPI Interim Director Alison Bethel McKenzie said: "We urge the authorities in Turkey to take note of this unprecedented united push to defend press freedom. Its initiation underscores the gravity of our press freedom concerns in the country. Journalists, like all other citizens in a democracy, should have the right to a fair trial. They should certainly not be locked up for years without being convicted of any crime. And they should never be sent to prison, or silenced in other ways, because of their critical reporting."

The South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO), a network of editors, media executives and leading journalists in South East and Central Europe and an affiliate of the International Press Institute (IPI), supports this statement.

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