

Government purge continues in Turkey after failed coup

Scientists and medical professionals are among those being detained or dismissed from their jobs by the Turkish Government after the failed coup attempt. Sharmila Devi reports.

For the **Human Rights Watch report** see <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/10/24/blank-check/turkeys-post-coup-suspension-safeguards-against-torture>

For the **Physicians for Human Rights report** see <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/reports/southeastern-turkey-health-care-under-siege.html>

Sebnem Fincanci, a leading forensic scientist at Istanbul University, faces imprisonment by the Turkish authorities but she continues to speak out about the tens of thousands of people detained without charges or trial since a failed coup attempt on July 15.

She is also the president of the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey and she could be sentenced to 14 years in prison on terrorism-related charges when she goes to trial on Jan 11, 2017, after a court hearing on Nov 8 refused to drop the charges. She was arrested in June after she joined a solidarity campaign with about 50 others to guest-edit a Kurdish newspaper. She was released 10 days later after an international outcry.

Since the coup attempt, the Turkish Government has embarked on mass detentions and dismissals of civil servants such as health-care workers, teachers, police officers, and judges. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has targeted not just followers of Fethullah Gulen—a former political ally and Islamist leader now exiled in the USA whom he blames for leading the coup attempt—but also opposition figures including Kurds and leftists, says Fincanci.

“It’s a total mess in Turkey and we don’t know what’s going to happen now regarding all the ongoing detentions”, she told *The Lancet*. “We are fighting for the truth. It’s not bravery. We just consider ourselves on the right path.”

Fincanci has a long record of human rights activism, having helped to draft the Istanbul Protocol, a non-binding set of guidelines for investigating and documenting torture adopted by the UN in 1999.

Turkey is confronting challenges on several fronts beyond the

crackdown on internal dissent, which is proceeding after many Turks condemned the attempted coup and voiced disappointment with the West for its lukewarm response to its failure.

Exact numbers are difficult to obtain but some 32 000 people have been jailed pending trial and more than 110 000 public servants including doctors, judges, teachers, and journalists have been detained, suspended, or sacked from their jobs, *Reuters* reported.

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The World Medical Association (WMA) has expressed concern about the arrests and detentions, with those accused having little or no access to lawyers amid reports of torture, beatings, lack of access to food and medicines, and forced confessions. In a recent letter to President Erdogan, the WMA and the Standing Committee of European Doctors called for an end to the victimisation of doctors in Turkey.

A Human Rights Watch report said Turkish police had tortured individuals in their custody and detailed 13 cases of alleged abuse, including stress positions, sleep deprivation, severe beatings, sexual abuse, and rape threats since the coup attempt.

Police behaviour and pressure from the authorities had also undermined the integrity of medical examinations for those in police custody and detention by often requiring that assessments take place in detention facilities and in the presence of police officers, said the report. “We’re seeing a massive purge that is going way beyond the legitimate aim of finding the coup

plotters”, Emma Sinclair-Webb, Human Right Watch’s Turkey director, told *The Lancet*. “People are being found guilty by association and if their name’s on a list, they’re being jailed. The numbers speak for themselves.”

Even before the current crackdown, Turkish medical professionals were concerned about the health-care system, including a rise in the number of medical schools without adequate teaching provision, the poor quality of public health services, and privatisation.

Meanwhile, violence has convulsed the Kurdish southeast since a ceasefire broke down in July last year, with little international attention focused on the displacement of thousands of people amid allegations of human rights abuses. Turkey is also home to 2.7 million registered Syrian refugees, but the total number might be more than 3.1 million.

Since Turkey agreed last year to take a more active role in the US-led fight against Islamic State (IS) in Syria after months of hesitation, it has been attacking Syrian Kurdish rebel groups. All this has been accompanied by a string of bombing attacks blamed on the Kurdistan Workers Party and IS, including a triple suicide bombing that killed 45 people at Istanbul international airport in June and was blamed on IS.

The international community often looks at these multiple crises separately. For example, a European Union deal with Turkey to stem the flow of refugees to Europe has been condemned by human rights groups, which say it turns a blind eye to the government’s increasing authoritarianism.

Turkey has imposed a state of emergency and suspects can be detained for 30 days, up from

4 days. But President Erdogan still has much support. He says the measures are needed to root out supporters of the coup. "It should never be forgotten that the failed coup in Turkey was aimed at world democracy as well", he told UN General Assembly in September this year.

Health-care problems

Many Turkish medics worry about the effects of all these crises on health care, most immediately how mass dismissals and staff shortages will hamper access and delivery. They also worry about their own personal safety. "I am very scared because we don't know what criteria is being used in the dismissals of health-care workers and I wouldn't be surprised if I was also dismissed", Ahmet Ozdemir Aktan, professor of surgery at Marmara University, told *The Lancet*.

The former president of the Turkish Medical Association (TMA) said there was a big problem getting adequate data from the Ministry of Health, even including the number of doctors in the country. "Probably we have 130 000 doctors with most of them in the cities, some 30–35% in Istanbul alone, so it's difficult to assess what the needs are", he said.

According to an assessment he wrote earlier this year for the TMA, Turkey had 93 faculties of medicine in Turkey, up from 44 in 2002, and that the Ministry of Health had suggested cutting admissions to medical school to 5250 from 12 000 in the coming 2 years. "This means that the TMA was right in its warnings, given the emerging problems of low quality medical education on the one hand and expected unemployment of doctors in the near future on the other", he wrote.

Meanwhile, the quest for fees by some doctors meant that in some clinics, the number of patient examinations per doctor per day was more than 100 and patients were seen at intervals of 5 minutes. "Future

doctors presently receive their training in a market-oriented health environment where patients have become customers", Aktan wrote.

Another big problem was nepotism and promotions based on political intervention, he said. Many Turks believe Gulenists had infiltrated all levels of the military, police, judiciary, and civil service over the past decade or so, during which time they led a campaign of harassment and persecution of leftists and other opposition figures. The tide has now turned and it is the Gulenists who are now being targeted.

The Gulenist infiltration meant the accuracy of forensic examinations in cases of torture and other crimes was in serious doubt and raised questions about what really happened to individuals then, said Aktan. "Adli tip [Turkish for forensic medicine] is a critical institution and part of the legal system. It seems it was under the control of unreliable elements."

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Allegations of human rights violations have also surfaced in the southeast since July, 2015, amid a succession of 24-hour sieges, called curfews by the Turkish authorities, which have blocked access to health care and cut off access to water, food, and electricity to whole cities. Thousands have died in the past year, both residents trapped by the curfews, and combatants, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has reported.

"The health sector has been largely decimated in the southeast. Both Turkish security forces and Kurdish armed groups have destroyed community health-care clinics, either through targeted or discriminate fire, resulting in an exodus of health-care professionals from the



Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has ordered a crackdown on dissidents

southeast, and the deterioration of all types of services", Christine Mehta, a PHR researcher, told *The Lancet*. "International observers have been blocked from travelling to the region so it has been extremely difficult to get updated information. But we continue to monitor the situation and show solidarity for colleagues working in those extremely challenging conditions."

On the Syrian front, medics and aid workers continue to try to improve the condition of refugees within Turkey and in Syria. The Independent Doctors Association (IDA), a cross-border Syrian humanitarian organisation founded in 2014, works with the Turkish authorities to evacuate patients into Turkey as well as to deliver aid into Syria.

Hassan Ibrahim, director of the Bab Al Salama Hospital on the Syrian-Turkish border run by the IDA, says there is an urgent need to ease access into Turkey. "Turkish hospitals of course suffer from a lot of pressure on them, especially the border hospitals when there is fighting or shelling on the Syrian border side areas", he told *The Lancet*. "Opening more humanitarian border crossings on the Turkish border would reduce the risk to patients' lives and will enable us to save more lives by sending them to Turkish hospitals."

Sharmila Devi