

State Department documents confirm US hypocrisy on human rights

The case of Turkey

14 September 1999

The Clinton administration justified its military onslaught against the people of Serbia with the claim that the bombing was motivated by concern over the violation of human rights in Kosovo. Similar claims are now being made on behalf of Australian and US military intervention in East Timor.

Throughout the Balkan War, the State Department and the White House, backed by the American media, charged that the government of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic was engaged in a Nazi-like campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Albanian majority in Kosovo.

The claim of humanitarian concern has been undermined by the events which have ensued in Kosovo since the Yugoslav surrender. Subsequent investigation has shown that Serb atrocities against the Albanians, while they did take place, were grossly exaggerated in order to provide a suitable pretext for war. Meanwhile the Albanian KLA has launched its own campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Serb minority, which has been largely expelled from Kosovo.

The claim of humanitarianism has been refuted from another source—in documents released by the American government itself, in the annual State Department review of human rights violations worldwide. In lengthy, country-by-country reports, the same agency which spearheaded the propaganda barrage against Yugoslavia details charges of mass repression against many of the closest American allies.

These reports demonstrate irrefutably, out of its own mouth, that the American government is a well-informed, knowing collaborator in some of the worst atrocities being perpetrated against oppressed peoples around the world, arming and financing governments which engage in ethnic cleansing, the forced removal of the population of villages and entire regions, and mass murder.

We have selected four of these reports for review. All four countries—Turkey, Sri Lanka, Israel and Colombia—have governments considered friendly by Washington. No bombs will be dropped on their capital cities and no magazine covers will appear with mug shots of their presidents, although the crimes committed by these regimes put Milosevic in the shade.

For the past 15 years the Turkish government has fought a civil war against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which had launched a military struggle for an independent state in the southeast of the country as a homeland for the minority Kurdish population.

In 1987 the Turkish government declared a state of emergency in the six southeastern provinces where a majority of the population is Kurdish. A regional governor was appointed to oversee these and six adjacent provinces. The US State Department report issued February 26, "Turkey Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998", says, "The state of emergency allows the regional governor to exercise certain quasi-martial law powers, including restrictions on the press and removal from the area of persons whose activities are deemed detrimental to public order."

Enforcing "public order" is a euphemism for a campaign of systematic terror against the Kurdish population in a war that has thus far cost the Turkish government \$120 billion. The Kurdish population of 13 million is a minority among Turkey's 65 million people and their traditional home is in poor, remote areas of the east and southeast, where incomes are less than half the national average. The State Department report explains:

"The situation in the southeast remained a serious concern. The Government has long denied the Kurdish population, located largely in the southeast, basic political, cultural, and linguistic rights. As part of its fight against the PKK, the Government forcibly displaced noncombatants, failed to resolve extrajudicial killings, tortured civilians, and abridged freedom of expression. The number of villagers forcibly evacuated from their homes since the conflict began is credibly estimated to be approximately 560,000.

"According to a December speech by President Demirel, since 1984, 23,638 PKK members, 5,555 security force members, and 5,302 civilians lost their lives in the fighting. In an effort to deny the PKK logistical support, the Government rationed food and other essentials ... causing severe shortages and hardship among the population.... Government security forces have returned to evacuated villages and burned homes, to deny them to the PKK."

In a chilling picture of what amounts to mass ethnic cleansing of the Kurds, the report continues: "Because so many villages already have been evacuated and because the fighting has now moved to mountains, government security forces evacuated and destroyed fewer villages than in previous years. The Government's stated purposes for the evacuations were to protect civilians or prevent PKK guerrillas from obtaining logistical support from the inhabitants. Some villagers alleged that the security forces evacuated them for refusing to participate in the paramilitary village guard system.

"The exact number of persons forcibly displaced from villages in the southeast since 1984 is unknown. Most estimates agree that 2,600 to 3,000 villages and hamlets have been depopulated. A few non-governmental organizations (NGOs) put the number of persons forcibly displaced as high as 2 million. On the low end, the Government reported that through 1997 the total number of evacuees was 336,717. A figure given by a former MP from the region—560,000—appears to be the most credible estimate of those forcibly evacuated."

The State Department openly acknowledges that the forcible evictions and destruction of villages is not due to actions carried out by paramilitary or "rogue" elements of the Turkish security services, but is a result of official government policy. "A parliamentary committee investigated the situation in the southeast and concluded in June that, among other things, the State was partly responsible for the displacements....

"Government programs to deal with and compensate the forcibly evacuated villagers remain inadequate, as is assistance to those who have

resettled in urban areas. Many migrants continue to live in overcrowded, unhealthful conditions with little opportunity for employment.”

“Despite Prime Minister Yilmaz’s stated commitment that human rights would be his government’s highest priority in 1998, serious human rights abuses continue. Extrajudicial killings, including deaths in detention from the excessive use of force, ‘mystery killings,’ and disappearances continued. Torture remained widespread. Police and Jandarma anti-terror personnel often abused detainees and employed torture during incommunicado detention and interrogation.”

The Turkish government runs a virtual Murder Inc., in which policemen work hand-in-hand with hired gangsters and fascists to eliminate suspected Kurdish activists and other political opponents. The State Department notes:

“A Government report that came to light in January and a 1997 parliamentary report revealed ties between the authorities and illegal gangs—ultra-nationalists and members of organized crime....

“Despite an increase in prosecutions through October, the rarity of convictions and the light sentences imposed on police and other security officials for killings and torture fostered a climate of impunity that probably remains the single largest obstacle to reducing human rights abuses. The lack of universal and immediate access to an attorney by those detained for political crimes is also a major factor in the commission of torture by police and other security forces.

“Human rights monitors remain greatly concerned about the 1996 Provincial Authority Law, which authorizes security forces to shoot to kill when challenging a suspect and grants provincial governors the power to declare a ‘state of emergency’ and to call in security forces.

“The HRA and other human rights groups recorded several mystery killings in which the assailant’s identity was unknown. Most of the reports pertain to the southeast, where security force complicity is widely alleged, and some of the victims were leaders or prominent members of the Kurdish community, local politicians, journalists, or members of HADEP [the bourgeois party which represents mainly Kurdish regions in the Turkish parliament].”

The State Department cites a series of incidents of political murders by the police:

“Six Aydin police officers were convicted of involuntary manslaughter and sentenced in April to 5 years imprisonment for the killing of student Baki Erdogan, who was beaten to death while in police custody in 1993; the police officers appealed the verdict. According to HRW, the defendants and approximately 60 plainclothes police officers brutally beat Erdogan’s sister and lawyer in the courtroom after the sentencing.

“The Mersin Penal Court in May sentenced police officer Suat Tunc to 2 years for the 1996 killing of 14-year-old Cetin Karakoyun, who died in police custody, but the sentence was converted to a small fine. In June the Istanbul Penal Court sentenced police officer Nurettin Ozturk to 6 years and 8 months imprisonment for involuntary manslaughter in the 1993 death in detention of Vakkas Dost. The 1997 acquittal of 11 police officers in the 1992 killing of Remzi Basalak while in detention in Adana was upheld by the Court of Appeals.”

The Turkish government has utilized the civil war to institutionalize and allow torture to be used as a common matter of course, as such, security authorities have a license to carry out violations of due process and human rights at will, acting more like a police force of military dictatorship than the parliamentary democracy that the US government claims Turkey to be. Again, quoting the State Department report:

“Despite the Constitution’s ban on torture, the Government’s cooperation with unscheduled foreign inspection teams, and public pledges by successive governments to end the practice, torture continued to be widespread. The HRF’s torture rehabilitation centers in Ankara, Izmir, Istanbul, and Adana had not completed compiling statistics on the number of credible applications for treatment during the year, but the HRF

estimated the number to be over 600.

“Human rights attorneys and physicians who treat victims of torture state that most persons detained for or suspected of political crimes usually suffer some torture during periods of incommunicado detention in police and Jandarma stations before they are brought before a court. Ordinary criminal suspects also report torture and mistreatment by police, according to HRW and the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights.

“Government officials admit that torture occurs. Although they deny that torture is systematic, they explain its occurrence by stating that it is closely tied to the fight against terrorism. However, many cases of torture occur in western Turkey, outside the zone of conflict.

“In April the Istanbul Chamber of Doctors certified that 2-year-old Azat Tokmak showed physical and psychological signs of torture after detention at an Istanbul branch of the anti-terror police. Azat’s mother Fatma Tokmak was detained in December 1996 on suspicion of PKK membership. The child was burned with cigarettes and kicked in an effort to make the mother confess. The child is living with other family members while his mother remains incarcerated. In Diyarbakir local police beat Sadik Kelekci and his 11-year-old grandson when they raided their house seeking to locate the boy’s father. The grandfather reportedly was beaten again while in police custody for a 3-day period. The grandson was not detained....

“Many detainees state that prosecutors ignore their claims of abuse during interrogation. Commonly employed methods of torture alleged by the HRF’s treatment centers include: High-pressure cold water hoses; electric shocks; systematic beatings, including on the soles of the feet and genitalia; blindfolding; hanging by the arms; sleep deprivation; vaginal and anal rape with truncheons and, in some instances, gun barrels; and other forms of sexual abuse.

“Other forms of torture were submersion of detainees in cold water, hanging sandbags on their necks, making them stand on one foot, releasing drops of water on their heads, sitting on their laps, riding on their shoulders, depriving them of oxygen, and withholding food.

“Credible sources in the human rights and legal communities estimate that judicial authorities investigate very few of the formal complaints involving torture and prosecute only a fraction of those investigated. Security personnel accused of violating human rights are held to a different standard than other citizens. Under the state of emergency, any lawsuit directed at government authorities must be approved by the state of emergency governor. Approval is rare. These constraints contribute to the low number of convictions for torture.

“Prison conditions remain poor. Juveniles and adults are incarcerated together and most prisons lack adequate medical care for routine treatment or even medical emergencies. Families often must supplement the poor quality food. Prisons are plagued by overcrowding, under-funding, and very poor administration. The Parliament’s Human Rights Committee investigated conditions in a variety of prisons and confirmed the use of torture.”

According to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, more journalists were killed or imprisoned in Turkey last year than in any other country. Dozens of human rights workers have also been murdered. The State Department report confirms that in prosecuting the civil war against the Kurds, the Turkish government has clamped down on the most basic of democratic rights and freedom of expression.

“Other restrictions on freedom of expression continued to be problems: Journalists, cultural figures, and politicians were harassed and prosecuted for expressing their ideas. Individuals and publications sympathetic to Kurdish, Islamist, and leftist viewpoints were particularly hard hit, as the Government continued its crackdown against fundamentalism and suspected PKK members and sympathizers.

“In June Esber Yagmurdereli, a blind human rights activist and respected lawyer, was re-arrested for failing to obtain a medical certificate

detailing his poor health, a condition of his conditional release in November 1997. Yagmurdereli was convicted in May 1997 of promoting Kurdish separatism on the basis of public assertions that the ethnic Kurdish minority is oppressed. In October 1997, he was remanded into custody to begin serving a 22-year sentence.

"In August playwright Mehmet Vahi Yazar was sentenced to 24 years in prison plus a fine 'for insulting the military' based on Article 312 of the Penal Code for a play portraying the state as opposed to religion. The four actors who performed in the play were sentenced to 16 years imprisonment plus fines. They remain incarcerated pending the outcome of their own trial.

"Limits on freedom of speech and of the press remained another serious problem. For example, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported that 25 journalists were imprisoned at year's end. Authorities banned or confiscated numerous publications and raided newspaper offices, encouraging self-censorship on reporting on the southeast.

Members of the legal pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party (HADEP) were sometimes the object of arbitrary arrests and often were harassed in the southeast for their legal political activities....

"In January journalists Mehmet Topaloglu, Selahatin Akinci, and Bulent Dil were killed in a police raid on an alleged militants house in Adana. According to the HRF, the evidence and witnesses did not support the police version of the events. An autopsy on Topaloglu found 11 bullets and a broken shoulder."

Racism against the Kurdish people is enshrined in Turkish law and regulations that are in place are designed specifically to eliminate the Kurdish people, language and culture as a distinct entity. These laws go far beyond anything that was in place in Kosovo where the Albanian population did have some basic rights within the Yugoslav state. The State Department report admits:

"The Constitution does not recognize the Kurds as a national, racial, or ethnic minority. There are no legal barriers to ethnic Kurds' participation in political and economic affairs, but Kurds who publicly or politically assert their Kurdish ethnic identity risk harassment or prosecution. The 1991 repeal of the law prohibiting publications or communications in Kurdish legalized private spoken and printed communications in Kurdish.

"The use of minority languages, including Kurdish, in television and radio broadcasts by political parties and in schools is restricted by a plethora of laws and even articles of the Constitution; these restrictions are invoked arbitrarily. Materials dealing with Kurdish history, culture, and ethnic identity continue to be subject to confiscation and prosecution under the 'indivisible unity of the state' provisions of the Anti-Terror Law.

"Kurdish-language broadcasts were not allowed. Printed material in Kurdish, while legal, was limited. Private channel television programs and print media continued to debate human rights and other issues of freedom of speech and the press, but the Government periodically closed down stations that aired programs in Kurdish or on Kurdish issues. Kurdish music recordings reportedly were widely available in the southeast."

In each of the past three years, the UN Register of Conventional Arms has documented that Turkey and Greece are the world's leading arms importers. The United States has been the leading exporter to both.

Turkey entered NATO in 1952 and has the second largest NATO military force behind the US. It was strategically important, sharing a common land border with the USSR—the only NATO country to do so—and controlling the exit of the Soviet Black Sea fleet through the Dardanelles and Bosphorus. Turkey's military spending is 3.5 percent of GNP and 12 percent of the national budget, the highest in NATO. The US and Turkey began their present close relationship with an agreement in 1947 which implemented the Truman Doctrine. As part of this cooperation, the US has loaned and granted Turkey more than \$4 billion in economic aid and more than \$14 billion in military assistance.

The US relationship with Turkey is based upon geostrategic

considerations and not upon the rights of ethnic Kurds or the democratic rights of the Turkish people. Assistant Secretary of Economic and Business Affairs Alan P. Larson, in an address before the American-Turkish Council in Washington in 1997, gave an insight into the US government's priorities and considerations in their support for Turkey:

"Energy is the sector where there is particularly significant potential for partnership between Turkey and the United States.... Turkey can vigorously re-engage in the development of Caspian Sea energy. The Baku-Ceyhan pipeline enjoys solid support as an outlet, but it requires constant advocacy as it competes with alternatives. A companion line to carry gas from Azerbaijan, and eventually from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, would appear to be a natural adjunct to the oil line. We would like to pursue this option with the Turkish government and with industry. We are prepared to assist Turkey in using its existing energy resources more efficiently."

It is no accident then that the former Assistant Secretary of State, and now US Ambassador to the United Nations, Richard Holbrooke, said in testimony before the US Congress in 1995, "Turkey is at the crossroads of almost every issue of importance to the United States on the Eurasian continent."

Ethnic cleansing and brutality in human rights violations are carried out on a scale by Turkey which is unmatched by any European nation, and yet the US continues not just to be a close ally but to provide critical financial and military aid. The State Department report makes clear that the US is well aware that the military equipment it supplies has been used in the civil war against the Kurds and serves to strengthen successive Turkish governments who themselves depend to a great extent upon the military for their own survival.



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