

On eve of court case to ban AKP

# Turkish prime minister blames PKK for Istanbul terror attacks

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On Sunday, Istanbul, Turkey's major city and economic centre with 12 million inhabitants, was rocked by two successive bomb blasts in the residential neighbourhood of Gungören at around 9:45 p.m., killing at least 17 people and injuring more than 150. Many of the injured are in critical condition.

According to news reports, the first blast occurred in a rubbish bin on a busy pedestrian street. Minutes later, a second and larger explosion occurred in another rubbish bin as a crowd gathered. According to eyewitness reports more than 1,000 people assembled at the scene of the explosions.

The timing of the action—on Sunday evening when people leave their houses to cool off from the often suffocating heat—makes it clear that the perpetrators aimed to kill as many people as they could. The sequence of the explosion was evidently timed so as to attract people to the scene and then ensure maximum casualties with the second blast.

Soon after the explosions, television news coverage was filled with terrifying scenes of victims lying on the street in shock and covered in blood, while many were trying to run from the scene in sheer panic and others searched desperately for their relatives and friends.

One eyewitness told the Turkish daily *Sabah*: “We ran to the spot when we heard the first blast. We were trying to help wounded people. But just 10 minutes after, or maybe less, the second bomb exploded. It was a devastating and deadly blast. It was a complete trap.”

Istanbul Governor Muammer Güler told reporters that what happened was certainly a terror attack and immediately sought to place the blame on the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Güler declared that no suicide bomber was involved in the attack, and the bombs were planted in dustbins in the street and activated by either remote control or by means of a timer—a tactic previously used by the PKK.

Despite the utterly speculative nature of this attribution of responsibility, the nationalist *Hurriyet* newspaper immediately ran a headline—“Civilian carnage from the

PKK”—which implied that there could be no doubt that the PKK was responsible for the attack.

The campaign to immediately identify the PKK as the agent of the bombing was then personally reinforced by the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who flew to Istanbul to visit the scene of the bombings. Surrounded by a crowd chanting anti-PKK slogans, Erdogan suggested that the bomb blasts were the work of Kurdish militants acting in revenge for air raids on PKK positions in northern Iraq, as well as a cross-border ground offensive by the Turkish military in February.

“Unfortunately, the costs of this are heavy,” Erdogan said. “The incident last night is one of them.” The prime minister then urged Turks not to back political parties that “support terrorism” - a comment regarded as an indirect criticism of the Democratic Society Party, a pro-Kurdish group believed to be influenced by the PKK.

On Monday, however, the *Milliyet* newspaper quoted an intelligence officer in Ankara who said the PKK had denied any responsibility for the attack. A pro-Kurdish news agency quoted PKK leader Zubeyir Aydar, who denied that his organisation had anything to do with the attacks. “The Kurdish freedom movement has nothing to do with this event, this cannot be linked to the PKK .....We think this attack was carried out by dark forces. We extend our condolences to the families of the victims and to the Turkish people.”

According to the latest press reports, the police have arrested three teenagers, aged 16 and 17, in connection with the attack.

While there is no doubt that in past the PKK has been involved in actions targeting civilians in Turkish cities as well as in small villages, there is a much longer history of the involvement of the Turkish military and allied fascist gangs in similar terror attacks. Islamic militant groups have also carried out terror bombings, and it is completely premature to attribute responsibility to the PKK at this point.

A full list of recent major terror attacks in Turkey would be very long. For example, earlier this month three policemen and three gunmen were killed in a gun battle outside the US consulate, again in Istanbul. On that occasion, the police claimed that the attackers were members of a Turkish Sunni fundamentalist group, the Great Eastern Islamic Raiders Front. The latest attack is the worst to hit Istanbul since November 2003, when more than 60 people were killed by a series of suicide bombings attributed by the authorities to Al Qaeda. The targets struck at that time included two synagogues, the British consulate and a British bank.

The latest bomb attacks came on the eve of a major court case aimed at banning the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party). The Turkish constitutional court opened its hearings for the dissolution of the AKP on Monday. The court's judges will consider an application by the chief prosecutor, Abdurrahman Yalcinkaya, to close down the party and ban 71 senior members, including the prime minister, Erdogan, and the president Abdullah Gul, from party politics for a series of "anti-secular" offences. A decision is expected this week.

The Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* drew a direct link between the terror bombings and the start of the court case against the AKP: "The bombs exploded on the eve of a session of the Supreme Court in Ankara at which a decision is to be taken on banning the conservative Islamic governing party the AKP, which is accused of Islamising the country... Eleven judges appointed by Gül's predecessor, the former magistrate Ahmet Necdet Sezer, a member of the secular wing, will decide whether 71 members of the governing party have to go. Seven votes in favour are sufficient to ban the AKP. Turkey knows that and [therefore] fears new terrorist attacks."

The court case is taking place against a background of provocations and slander by the country's traditional Kemalist establishment in alliance with the Turkish military, which regard themselves as the "guardians" of the Turkish secular state. The Kemalist and military camp have repeatedly accused the ruling AKP of selling out Turkey's national interests.

These political judgements have found their way into the indictment demanding the banning of the AKP. In the indictment, the prosecutor Yalcinkaya has linked Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to "the American Broader Middle East Project which aims at ruling countries via moderate Islamic regimes."

The Turkish military will no doubt use the terrorist bombings to increase their intimidation of the government and society in general by throwing more fuel on its ongoing campaign of chauvinism and nationalism. The military has a

long practice of turning the funeral services of terror attack victims into massive demonstrations characterised by an anti-Kurdish and strongly chauvinist mood. In such a campaign, the Kemalist establishment and the military can rely on support from broad sections of the Turkish media.

The response of the ruling AKP, threatened by a permanent ban, is to repeatedly make concessions to its Kemalist opponents. Earlier this year Erdogan reacted to pressure from the Turkish military and allowed army units to conduct anti-Kurdish operations deep inside neighbouring northern Iraq. Now in the run-up to the constitutional court ruling, Erdogan has again sought to play down the differences with his Kemalist rivals.

In an interview last weekend with the *Hürriyet* newspaper, which has been in the forefront of the political campaign against the AKP, Erdogan declared that he had made mistakes in the past and that the main issue was to seek the unity of a divided nation. The fact that he spoke with the editor of *Hürriyet*, Ertugrul Özkök, at all is generally regarded as a major concession to the Kemalist camp. Erdogan's comments immediately after these latest bomb attacks will also strengthen the hand of his opponents.

The bomb blasts in Istanbul are a reactionary provocation and the wanton slaughter of civilians is a political atrocity which must be roundly condemned, irrespective of what political faction is responsible.

In an environment in which poverty, unemployment and social inequality increasingly dominate daily life, such reactionary acts can only serve to encourage the poisonous, non-stop campaign of chauvinism that is encouraged by both the Kemalist and Islamist camps and create a fertile breeding ground for far right and fascist tendencies such as the neo-fascist MHP (National Movement Party), which enjoys close links with sections of the Turkish military.

The latest bombings in Istanbul underline the growing danger of a renewed military putsch and the threat of civil war, as frictions between the Kemalist camp and the economic and political elite around the AKP intensify.



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