

Turkey: Another political detainee tortured and killed in prison

Our reporter
15 October 2008

Turkish police, prison officers and gendarmerie tortured and killed 29-year-old Engin Ceber on October 10. Ceber had been arrested, along with three others—Aysun Baykal, Özgür Karakaya and Cihan Gü—while distributing a special issue of a legal magazine, *Yürüyü?*, in the Sarıyer district of Istanbul. Ceber was a member, together with his three friends, of the radical protest organisation Rights and Freedoms Front (HOC).

The special edition of their magazine dealt with the impunity of Turkish authorities in last year's shooting of 19-year-old Ferhat Gerçek. Police shot the youth, paralysing him, after a quarrel that arose because he was selling a political magazine.

According to news reports, Ceber's ordeal began immediately after his arrest, with police beating him and his three companions as they were being taken to the police station. Official medical reports prepared by state-employed doctors contain medical evidence of physical abuse on the evening of Ceber's arrest. During their subsequent detention in Istanbul's Metris Prison, the four detainees were stripped naked, kicked and repeatedly beaten with wooden truncheons.

A further medical report prepared by doctors on September 29 shows that the injuries sustained by Ceber worsened significantly following his continuous torture. Ceber's punishment at the hands of state officials continued for 10 days until he was transferred to hospital on October 7 due to his seriously worsening health condition. After slipping into a coma, he died of brain haemorrhage less than three days later.

Ceber's lawyer, Taylan Tanay, told the press that his client had complained several times that he was being

subjected to inhumane treatment in prison. On October 6, Ceber told Tanay, "Our situation is very bad, we are in a hornet's nest, we may not leave this place alive."

Tanay said, "The last time I met with him before he was taken to the hospital there were bruises on his face. He said he was being tortured. A few days later I wanted to meet with my client once more, but prison officials said he was dead. They later said he was being kept in the intensive care unit of the Sisli Etfal Hospital."

The three others detained along with Engin Ceber remain in pre-trial detention. They have also reportedly been severely tortured, with one of them, Aysun Baykal, in critical condition. Baykal's lawyer Oya Aslan has reported that her client requires dialysis for a kidney problem, and is now unable to stand up because of the torture she has endured.

Aslan, told an Internet news site, Bianet, that she had previously filed two applications for the release of Ceber and his three friends. Her first application, dated October 6, was rejected. Her next application on October 9 authorised Ceber's release shortly before he died in hospital, but the release of the other three have been denied.

Aslan also told Bianet: "We filed criminal reports about the director of the prison, the doctors and the officers."

Ceber's horrific death is not an isolated case. On July 5, 2007, Amnesty International issued a report titled "The Entrenched Culture of Impunity Must End," documenting human rights abuses in Turkey. The report highlighted the widespread use of torture in

Turkey and a "culture of impunity" allowing the authorities to escape accountability while the courts disregarded medical evidence of torture. (See "Amnesty International report on Turkey: failure to punish perpetrators of torture" <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2007/jul2007/turk-j14.shtml>)

Recent statistics show that the number of cases of torture and mistreatment in Turkey increased almost 100 percent in 2007 compared to the previous year. In August, Justice Minister Mehmet Ali Sahin stated that 4,719 individuals, including 471 children, had faced "torture," "excessive torture," and "excessive violence" in 2006 and 2007.

Human rights organisations believe that the number of people subjected to torture is as much as three of four times higher than official figures indicate. These figures cover only the number of individuals who issue complaints of torture to judicial bodies. Unsurprisingly, many victims refrain from undertaking complaints because they fear they may be punished a second time.

Even as he acknowledged thousands of torture cases, Justice Minister Sahin insisted, "If anyone says there is systematic torture in Turkish prisons, I will deny it completely."

This declaration underscored the cynical character of Sahin's recent apology to Ceber's family and relatives "on behalf of my government and the state." The minister promised that anyone responsible for torture would be punished, and announced that 19 prison personnel "who might have responsibilities in his death" have been suspended pending an investigation. "I am pushing this ahead with a high sensitivity, the number [of suspensions] could rise as the investigation widens. I am very sorry that such an incident was allowed to happen in Turkey at such a time," he declared.

The rare government apology is aimed at quelling widespread public outrage at the latest death in custody.

Torture has long been one of the central instruments of repression utilised by the Turkish state against those identified as potential threats or opponents. Amnesty

International noted: "The 1980 [military] coup was accompanied by the detention of one million people, many of whom were tortured and died in police custody, were forcibly disappeared or tried in unfair proceedings. The mass violations of human rights in the mainly Kurdish-populated southeast and eastern regions of Turkey in the 1990s took the form of enforced disappearances and killings by unknown perpetrators which the state authorities showed no willingness to solve, and the forcible eviction of around one million villagers when villages were evacuated and destroyed by the security forces during the conflict with separatist armed groups."

Police violence has increased in recent years, particularly since the Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) government passed the 2007 Law on Police Duties and Authorities. The World Socialist Web Site anticipated the effect of this repressive legislation at the time it was implemented: "On June 2, the Turkish parliament, under the pressure of the ongoing military intervention, approved in great haste a bill that would increase the powers of the police considerably. The new bill gives vast powers to security forces.... Under such conditions, one can expect to see a sharp rise in torture, other ill-treatment, killings and enforced disappearances in Turkey."

When this repressive legislation was passed, human rights organisations have repeatedly protested to the AKP government about incidents of torture, deaths in detention and extra-judicial killings. But the government, which has appointed Islamist sympathisers to virtually all administrative posts within the police apparatus, has failed to take any action. This clearly demonstrates that the Islamists are no less averse to utilising state repression and torture than are their military-aligned "secular" rivals within the Turkish ruling elite.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact