

# Tensions mount in Turkey after second death in protests

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In the wake of bloody clashes that left two people dead and several wounded in the working class neighborhood of Okmeydani in central Istanbul, Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan delivered a speech Friday to the party faithful of his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) that seemed designed to provoke wider violence and lay the groundwork for a more intense crackdown.

The demonstrations in the area were part of a nationwide wave of protests sparked by the industrial massacre last week of 301 miners at the Soma coal mine in western Turkey. The protesters were also commemorating the death of 15-year-old Berkin Elvan, from the same neighborhood. During last year's wave of protests, the youth was struck in the head by a police tear gas canister as he went out to buy bread and spent 269 days in a coma before dying in March.

The first of this week's victims, Ugur Kurt, was—like Berkin Elvan—not even involved in the protests. A 34-year-old cleaner who leaves behind a wife and two-year-old son, Kurt was shot in the head Thursday as he was attending a funeral at a *cemevi*, a religious and cultural center of Turkey's Alevi minority.

His own funeral was held at the same place on Friday, drawing hundreds of local residents. A senior police officer who arrived on the scene as part of the investigation into the killing was surrounded by the crowd and roughed up. His clothes in tatters, he was forced to hide inside a television van for safety.

Several hundred people staged a sit-in outside the hospital where Kurt died, chanting, "The murdering state has taken another life."

The second victim was identified Friday as Ayhan Y?lmaz, 42. A picture of him lying in the street, blood flowing from his head, with two cops in front of his body, was widely posted in Turkish social media

together with the word "enough!"

In the face of the explosive anger over the killings, Turkish prosecutors announced that they had taken the guns of the policemen at the scene to investigate which one fired the bullet that killed Kurt. The daily *Radikal* newspaper, however, quoted lawyers who pointed out that prosecutors neither interrogated the officers involved or checked them for gunpowder residue, indicating that the probe was a sham.

"For God's sake, should police stand idly by against all of this?" Erdogan declared at a meeting of AKP provincial party leaders. "I don't understand how they stay so patient." Even as his government is going through the motions of an investigation into Thursday's shooting, the Turkish prime minister's words implicitly suggested a more liberal use of live ammunition in dispersing protests.

He continued by ridiculing protesters for raising the death of 15-year-old Berkin Elvan. "What is it?" he continued. "They wanted to hold a ceremony to commemorate Berkin Elvan. Will we perform a ceremony for every death? He died and it's over."

Erdogan also lashed out against the mounting protests over the Soma disaster and the growing wave of criticism of his government's increasingly apparent collusion with the owners of the privatized mine in creating the conditions that killed the miners. Earlier, the prime minister infamously described the worst industrial slaughter in the country's history as an "ordinary" incident.

Erdogan described his critics as "ruthless," while repeating a phrase he coined that, thanks to his government, Turkey could help both "Soma and Somalia." He derided those denouncing the government's role in the disaster as people on their "smart phones" tweeting messages and thinking they

are “the saviors of the world.”

The Turkish government recently blocked Twitter for two weeks, lifting the ban only after Twitter promised that it would be more “sensitive” in complying with Turkish court orders to take down what the government views as offending content.

Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the leader of the main opposition party, the Kemalist Republican People’s Party (CHP), used a press conference Friday to accuse Erdogan of “banging the war drums” and to warn that the prime minister’s rhetoric risked “dragging the country into a fire” and “deepening polarization.” He added that, while police should not fire on Turkish protesters, the police are “our children too.”

The police attacks in Istanbul are part of a nationwide crackdown on the protests sparked by the Soma disaster. In the western province of Izmir, riot police backed by a helicopter invaded Ege University to break up the occupation of a building by students protesting both the mine deaths and the death of Berkin Elvan. Erdogan issued a decree at the beginning of the current academic year replacing private security guards at the universities with police as a means of quelling student protests.

New and larger protests are inevitable. Alevi organizations have called for demonstrations Sunday in Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir and other cities over this week’s killings. Moreover, the current round of protests is running up to the first anniversary next week of the protests over plans to turn Istanbul’s Taksim Gezi Park into a shopping mall. These protests and their brutal suppression spilled over into nationwide confrontations over the course of the summer of 2013 in which seven people lost their lives.

And public outrage is growing over the continuing revelations from the Soma mine disaster implicating both the owners and the government in what amounts to industrial mass murder.

Miners told the daily newspaper *Zaman* that the hundreds who died from carbon monoxide poisoning at the mine never had a chance because gas masks that had been issued to them were essentially useless. Manufactured in China in 1993, the masks’ filters had expired years before the disaster. This, combined with carbon monoxide sensors that were not functioning, turned the mine into a death trap.

While the mine’s owners and managers had earlier

claimed that the masks would have provided the miners 45 minutes worth of oxygen, miners themselves insisted this was a lie.

The daily *Radikal* interviewed an official at the company that sells the gas masks, which are in use at other mines as well. They reportedly sell for \$17 each in bulk—one-twentieth of the price of a modern device that provides up to 75 minutes of oxygen. The Chinese mask, the official said, wouldn’t work because they were too old and, at best, would have provided oxygen for barely five minutes.

The miners and their families also told *Zaman* that the fact that the mine was a deathtrap was well known to both the owners and the government. Run by the state until 2005, it was shut down precisely because of the dangerous levels of gas. The first private company to obtain operating rights at the mine also “decided to halt operations after realizing the severity of dangers in the mine,” the paper reports.

Yet, according to the miners, the new owners, Soma Holding, ignored the dangers and “continued dispatching the miners to work, deliberately sending them to their deaths.”

Ilkay Yetim, who had worked at the mine for five years, told the newspaper: “The heat has reached unbearable levels, especially in the last two months” at the mine and it had “long been evident that a problem would happen.” While the miners had persistently warned the mine bosses, their concerns were dismissed. “All they cared about was the output of coal and how to rake in premium payments for it,” Yetim said.



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