



Turkish doctors sentenced to jail for statement on war

Doctors who called war a “man-made public health problem” receive jail sentences, in the latest government-led assault on the Turkish Medical Association. Sharmila Devi reports.



Alan Gocher/NurPhoto/Getty Images

Medical groups and human rights campaigners around the world have condemned the sentencing of imprisonment for 11 members of the Turkish Medical Association (TMA) for speaking out against a Turkish military offensive in the Kurdish enclave of Afrin in northern Syria last year.

The TMA had issued a statement saying “war is a man-made public health problem” in a statement issued on Jan 24, 2018, to which Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said that the group was a “gang of unthinking slaves”.

At an Ankara criminal court on May 3, the TMA members were sentenced to 20 months in prison for “inciting hatred and hostility”, and one member was given a further 19 months for “terrorist propaganda” over social media postings, the association said in a statement.

Since a failed military coup in 2016, thousands of professionals, including health-care workers, lawyers, and teachers have been sacked or arrested and more than 77 000 jailed pending trial, on charges of supporting the alleged coup backers and terrorism.

The TMA has more than 83 000 members, who represent 80% of Turkey’s doctors. Five of the 11 convicted members are on the TMA’s central council. All 11 members remain free pending an appeal, according to the French news agency Agence France-Presse.

“A punishment was given by the court, but we do not accept it”, said Sinan Adiyaman, TMA chair. “We will do everything we can to annul this. We will fight until the end.”

The sentencing of the medics was “a wake-up call for all health professionals”, Vincent Iacopino, senior medical adviser at Physicians

for Human Rights—a USA-based non-profit—told *The Lancet*. “As the TMA said, there are health consequences to war, so it is a health problem. But the Turkish Government has passed laws that criminalise the delivery of health care in protest settings and this does risk the health of people”, he said.

“...the TMA members were sentenced to 20 months in prison for ‘inciting hatred and hostility’...”

“It is a basic duty of our profession to provide care in a non-partisan way. The Turkish Government is sending a message to civil society to undermine the idea of free expression and the delivery of medical care to protestors.”

The sentencing was also condemned by the Standing Committee of European Doctors and the World Medical Association (WMA). “Denouncing violence and supporting human rights and peace is not a criminal offence”, Frank Ulrich Montgomery, the Standing Committee of European Doctors president, said in a statement. “We very much regret the outcome of the trial and we stand by the leaders of the Turkish Medical Association in their efforts to respect the ethics of the medical profession.”

On May 9, the WMA, which represents more than 10 million physicians, also condemned the use of solitary confinement in Turkish prisons. In a letter to Erdoğan, the WMA leaders said it had been informed that around 3000 detainees in 90 Turkish prisons were currently on hunger strike, in protest of the widespread practice of solitary confinement as a disciplinary measure.

“According to our sources, the current conditions in prisons, in particular the deteriorating health-care system, do not allow adequate follow-up by physicians of prisoners on hunger strikes. We are aware of emerging severe health problems as a result, such as gastrointestinal bleeding or hypersensitivity reaction, without mentioning the devastating impact on mental health for many”, said the letter signed by Frank Montgomery, WMA chair.

“We would also like to be assured that prison authorities allow access to drinking water and to sugar, salt, vitamins and other supplements added to the drinking water consumed by the hunger strikers”, he said.

Much international attention has recently been focused on criticising Turkey’s decision on May 6 to scrap the result of Istanbul’s mayoral election because of alleged irregularities. Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party lost to the opposition Republican People’s Party in the March 31 vote. A new vote will be held on June 23.

Turkey was “drifting towards dictatorship”, said Guy Verhofstadt, a leader in the European Parliament.

Erdoğan, who has been in power for 16 years, was also criticised by the TMA after the opening of one of the world’s largest hospitals in Ankara in March. The hospital cost around €1 billion, has around 3810 beds, and covers an area the size of about 100 football pitches. Critics said such a large size would cause logistical problems.

Several large-scale projects have been built under Erdoğan’s presidency including bridges, airports, and high-speed rail lines.

Sharmila Devi