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Turkey: Nurcan Baysal investigated for social media posts on COVID-19 and prison conditions

On 30 March 2020, **Nurcan Baysal** was interrogated by the police in Diyarbakır as part of a criminal investigation opened against her in connection with her recent social media posts on the measures taken in the province in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. If indicted, she may be charged with “provoking the public to hatred and hostility”.

[Nurcan Baysal](#) is a Kurdish human rights defender and journalist based in the South-Eastern province of Diyarbakır. In 2015 and 2016, she documented human rights violations committed during the frequent military operations carried out in the region. As a journalist, she covers Kurdish issues and topics related to human rights, development and poverty. She has co-founded several civil society organisations and has contributed to many studies on forced migration, poverty, development and gender. In recent years, she has been involved in the establishment of a refuge for Yazidi women fleeing the Islamic State. She is also the [Global Laureate](#) of the 2018 Front Line Defenders Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk.

On 30 March 2020, Nurcan Baysal was summoned to the police headquarters in Diyarbakır to give her statement for a new criminal investigation initiated against her. She requested the interrogation to be postponed until the lockdown measures against the COVID-19 pandemic are over, but was denied on the grounds of urgency. The police said that there was an arrest warrant for her which had not been implemented for public health reasons.

The woman human rights defender went to the police station with her lawyer. She was interrogated about her recent social media posts, mostly commenting on the precautions taken by the government against COVID-19 and their implementation in Diyarbakır and other Kurdish cities. The police also asked about her two recent articles, one of them titled “[Routine life goes on in Diyarbakır despite coronavirus](#)”. She was further questioned about her motives for posting on Twitter which amounted to a “threat to incitement to fear and panic among the public”, according to the record of her statement issued by the police. She was informed that she was officially under arrest but could go home due to the public health measures. She was asked to return to the police headquarters the next day in order to be taken to the Prosecutor’s office to give her statement.

The next morning, on 31 March, Nurcan Baysal and her lawyers went to the Diyarbakır police headquarters as requested and were escorted to the Prosecutor’s office. There, the defender was questioned about her social media posts, in particular those mentioning the poor prison conditions and calling for the release of prisoners due to health risks. After taking her statement, the prosecutor referred Nurcan Baysal to the Justice of Peace in Criminal Matters on suspicion of “provoking the public to hatred and hostility”, and requested her judicial control in the form of a travel ban.

Nurcan defended herself before the Justice of Peace, saying that it was her duty as a journalist and a human rights defender to inform the public and raise awareness. She further asserted that a travel ban would impede her work. While the defender was released without a travel ban, she remains under investigation. If indicted, she may be charged with “provoking the public to hatred and hostility”.

Front Line Defenders expresses serious concern about the continued judicial harassment and intimidation of Nurcan Baysal, as it believes that the new investigation against her is solely motivated by her peaceful and legitimate activities in defence of human rights.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Turkey to:

1. Immediately close the investigation against Nurcan Baysal and stop her ongoing judicial harassment, as it is believed to be solely motivated by her peaceful and legitimate activities in defence of human rights;
2. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Turkey are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.

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