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19 October 2022

Turkey: Human rights organisation Göç İzleme Derneği members accused of membership of an armed terrorist organisation

On 14 September 2022, Istanbul's 26th Heavy Criminal Court accepted the indictment prepared by Istanbul Public Prosecutor against 23 individuals, of which at least eighteen are human rights defenders, including the co-chairs, board members and staff of **Göç İzleme Derneği - GÖÇİZDER** (Migration Monitoring Association). All are accused of "membership of armed terrorist organisation" [Kurdistan Workers' Party - PKK] and an additional charge of "terrorist propaganda" was made for one human rights defender. The indictment argues that the human rights organisation misused the EU project funds to finance the PKK members and the equipment used in its actions and activities.. The first hearing of the trial will start on 13 December 2022.

[GÖÇİZDER](#) was established in Istanbul in 2016 with the aim of developing effective social solidarity among the masses of people subjected to migration in general and forced migration in particular, and to raise the demands of migration victims for a humane life. In line with this purpose, it aims to support internally displaced persons in their pursuit of justice, to make the fundamental rights violations caused by forced displacement visible to the public, to raise awareness about the social, economic and psychological problems that citizens have experienced during the resettlement process, to recognise the grievances of people who have suffered serious human rights violations and to support them.

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The indictment argues that the real aim of GÖÇİZDER is to "advocate that the immigration movements in eastern and south-eastern Turkey caused by the repression and persecution of Turkish state and use this discourse as a propaganda tool to impose the ideology of the PKK/KCK terrorist organisation; to incite the IDP families against the state through -so called- aid and solidarity; and to enhance the commitment of the PKK/KCK constituency by giving the impression that they stand by the immigrated families in order to ensure that these families unite around the organisation [PKK]; and put our state in a difficult situation in the international arena through agitation by the stated activities".

The legitimate human rights activities of the organisation, such as organising meetings and workshops, publishing informative leaflets for internally displaced people (IDP), reports,

and participating in other organisation's meetings and activities have been listed as offences in the indictment. The indictment also alleges that the project proposals submitted to EU institutions by GÖÇİZDER were approved by way of pressure/bilateral relations of the European Kurdish Democratic Societies Congress, which is defined as the umbrella structure of the armed group in Europe. Several international funding organisations and institutions, including Front Line Defenders have been listed as funders of GÖÇİZDER.

On June 3 2022, police raided the office of GÖÇİZDER and the homes of its executives and members, arresting 22. The human rights defenders were kept in incommunicado detention for 24 hours and following eight days of detention, they were transferred to court by the prosecutor's office with an arrest request. The court ruled for the arrest of sixteen prisoners. The police confiscated the computers, official records, books, print materials and films prepared by the association during the raid.

A confidentiality order was placed on the investigation file, which prevented the human rights defenders and the lawyers get access to the accusations and any incriminating evidence. The lawyers were able to see the contents of the investigation file and the indictment only after the court accepted the indictment. Yet, since 2 September 2022 the content of the indictment and accusations were published by several pro-government media outlets.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the persistent use of anti-terror laws by Turkish authorities to silence the human rights defenders for many years and the recent trend of abusing the legislation on financing terrorism to further criminalise and silence them. It reminds authorities that all grant applications are handled with due diligence and only after a detailed review a grant is approved. All grants were accounted for through narrative and financial reports by the association. Front Line Defenders believes that charges against GÖÇİZDER are politically motivated and stands by its decision to support the human rights organisation with two separate grants in 2020 .

Front Line Defenders call the authorities in Turkey to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release all human rights defenders and others who are arrested in connection with the Göç İzleme Derneği investigation since June 2022, as it is believed that they are being held solely for their peaceful human rights work in defending and promoting the rights of the displaced and immigrated people;
2. Cease judicial harassment of human rights defenders using anti-terror laws, including on financing terrorism for doing their legitimate and peaceful human rights work;
3. Refrain from the discourse and practice that creates an atmosphere where the human rights defenders and whole civil society are forced to believe that accepting and using international funds would put them at risk of judicial action;
4. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in Turkey and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.