

KURDS MASSACRED

Turkish Forces Kill Scores of Peaceful Demonstrators

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Background and Summary

Since the inception of the modern Turkish state in 1923, Turkey's Kurdish population has been attempting to obtain greater autonomy to administer its own affairs and more breathing space to express its cultural identity. For just as long, Turkish governments have quashed these efforts. Turkey recognizes its Armenian and Jewish citizens as distinct minorities, but not its Kurds. It permits broadcasts in foreign languages, but not in Kurdish. Turkey has banned Kurdish schools, Kurdish publications, Kurdish associations and, until recently, even the word "Kurd." And, historically, Turkish authorities have resorted to violent force, including killings, beatings, and torture, to suppress the Kurds.

Today, that violence is concentrated in the ten provinces of southeastern Turkey, where the majority of Turkey's estimated ten million Kurds live and where, since 1984, the banned Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) has been waging guerrilla warfare in support of its goal of an eventual independent Kurdish state. The PKK's attacks have caused hundreds of civilian and military deaths in an underreported conflict that verges on civil war. In response to the PKK's attacks, Turkish security forces -- a bewildering array of police, gendarmes, army soldiers, "special forces" and anti-terrorist commandos -- have waged their own campaign of terror in the southeast, targeting not only hardened PKK guerrillas, but almost any Kurd suspected of supporting or even sympathizing with the PKK's aims.¹ As a result of this bloody cycle of

¹ Although the Turkish government tends to label all supporters of the PKK "guerrillas," its nomenclature overlooks important distinctions. The true PKK guerrillas consist of well-armed Kurds (estimated by the Turkish government at about 10,000) who launch operations from their mountainous bases in northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey and are thus commonly referred to as "mountain men." In cities and towns throughout southeastern Turkey, the PKK also has thousands of "militias," civilians willing to carry out guerrilla activities, including assassinations and arson, at the PKK's direction; in some towns, such as Cizre, the militias are well-organized and operate what is, in effect, a shadow government through a combination of intimidation and popular support. And then there are many more ordinary Kurds who simply support the PKK's goals, but not necessarily all of its tactics, and who are not integrated into any kind of command structure.

violence and counter-violence, the PKK's support among the Kurds in Turkey has risen dramatically in the past few years, and the noncombatant civilian population of the southeast has become increasingly squeezed between the extremists on both sides.

The conflict between Kurds and the Turkish government reached new levels of intensity during this past *Nevroz*— the long-banned traditional Kurdish New Year's festival that was celebrated on March 21. In keeping with conciliatory statements he made toward the Kurds upon being elected in November 1991, Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel announced months before the event that Kurds would be permitted to celebrate Nevroz freely, as long as they did so peacefully. The PKK's guerrilla commander, however, Abdullah ("Apo") Ocalan, declared from his base outside Turkey that Nevroz would be the beginning of a spring offensive, a mass uprising against the Turkish state.² Although many considered Ocalan's statement to be rhetorical bluster, Turkish security forces took it seriously. In late January, Turkish President Turgut Ozal declared the "the Armed Forces with super power will go to the [southeast] region next term. This will be an extra-ordinary power. These forces will not let the bandits live there...We have to remove the roots of all these events. This is the solution." Ozal's statement was followed by an accelerated military build-up in the southeast; tens of thousands of soldiers and police and many tanks and helicopters were deployed throughout the region.

As it happened, in most cities, towns and villages of southeastern Turkey -- including Diyarbakir, the region's largest city and administrative center -- Nevroz was celebrated without violence. In several towns where support for the PKK runs especially high, however -- principally Cizre and Sirnak in Siirt province, Nusaybin in the province of Mardin, Van in the province of the same name, and Yuksekova in Hakkari province -- violence and bloodshed erupted on a scale not seen in the region in recent memory. Approximately eighty Kurds were killed in southeastern Turkey during the three-day period from March 21 to March 23, and hundreds more were injured.

Accounts of the events were confused and in many instances misleading. Newspapers in the United States reported "fighting between Turkish troops and Kurdish *guerrillas* ... clashes in recent days that reportedly left scores of people dead and wounded" (*New York Times*, March 30, 1992); the European press tended to emphasize conflicts "between troops and Kurdish *demonstrators*" (*Financial Times* (London), March 23, 1992 -- emphasis added); and Turkish human rights groups reported mass killings of *unarmed civilians*.

In an effort to determine the cause of the Nevroz casualties, Helsinki Watch sent a mission to Turkey in late April. As with previous missions to southeastern Turkey, the investigation encountered difficulties: travel was impeded frequently by roadblocks, certain areas (such as Sirnak) were entirely inaccessible, plainclothesmen shadowed the mission at various points, and many Kurds would meet with Helsinki Watch only clandestinely, and even then insisted that their names be withheld. The Turkish government clearly does not welcome independent fact-gathering about the Kurdish problem. During the week of the Helsinki Watch mission, for example, a Kurdish journalist who lives in Germany was detained while travelling in and around Cizre and released only after she was interrogated and insulted for more than four hours. Two other journalists, from Sweden, were detained by the authorities in Cizre and escorted out of the region by force. Despite such obstacles, Helsinki Watch managed to conduct on-site

² Ocalan reportedly operates out of bases in Damascus and Lebanon's Bekaa valley.

investigations in both Cizre and Nusaybin and to interview more than 40 Turkish citizens, Kurdish and non-Kurdish, including eyewitnesses to the Nevroz violence, journalists, politicians, doctors, lawyers, intellectuals, human rights activists and government officials, including the centrally-appointed "supergovernor" of the ten southeastern provinces that are subject to a state of emergency.

On the basis of this investigation, Helsinki Watch has concluded:

- **that heavily-armed pro-PKK sympathizers, but probably not full-fledged "guerrillas," were present in several southeastern towns during Nevroz, including Cizre and Sirnak, but not Nusaybin;**
- **that in Cizre and Sirnak, but not in Nusaybin, clashes did take place between security forces and armed PKK followers, mainly in the evenings of March 21 and March 22;**
- **but that, at least in Cizre and Nusaybin, all or nearly all of the casualties resulted from unprovoked, unnecessary and unjustified attacks by Turkish security forces against peaceful Kurdish civilian demonstrators.**

In the pages that follow, we focus on the Nevroz violence that took place in Cizre and Nusaybin, and follow with some more general observations on the current situation in southeastern Turkey.

Cizre

Although the events that occurred in Cizre from March 20 to March 23 easily lend themselves to differing interpretations, the basic facts are clear enough. All of the eyewitnesses questioned by Helsinki Watch in separate interviews -- including local residents, local journalists, and Turkish journalists from outside the region -- agreed on the essential details of what actually took place in Cizre during Nevroz.

On Nevroz eve, Friday March 20th, small crowds gathered throughout Cizre to begin celebrating Nevroz in typical Kurdish fashion, by singing and dancing. At about six that evening, another distinctively Kurdish and Middle Eastern form of celebration began -- the repeated shooting of weapons into the sky. From all parts of town, the shooting continued, round after round, for a full two hours. The display plainly demonstrated that pro-PKK sympathizers in Cizre had weapons in substantial number, and not just pistols.³

³ **The exact composition of the PKK presence in Cizre during Nevroz is difficult to determine. One journalist interviewed by Helsinki Watch claimed that, in the late afternoon on March 21, he observed as many as 500 heavily-armed "mountain men" in full control of the streets and alleyways behind the hotel where most of the journalists were staying. Three other journalists who were in Cizre at the time reject that account, claiming that they saw only about 200 well-armed men at most, and that these were local "militias" and not full-fledged PKK guerrillas. They note further that it would have been quite difficult for a large unit of PKK "mountain men" to infiltrate the town prior to Nevroz; next-to-impossible for them to have escaped undetected once clashes began; and even the government does not claim to have captured or killed any substantial number of PKK guerrillas in Cizre. Although there may be some disagreement on their composition, the witnesses all agreed that the PKK elements in town during Nevroz had rifles (primarily Kalashnikovs), some machine guns and even rocket-propelled grenades.**

At the same time, however, the Turkish military presence was massive and on a very different scale. The Syrian border just to the south of Cizre was effectively sealed through a combination of manned watchtowers, tanks and "Panzers," the local term for German-made armed personnel carriers of varying sizes; the roads leading west to Nusaybin and Idil, east to Silopi, and north to Sirnak were secured by roadblocks; and the hills on the northern perimeter of the town were studded with tanks. Turkish military and police forces had Cizre surrounded, Panzers stood guard at key intersections in the town center, and the Turkish military had helicopters and planes available if needed.

Despite news reports that portrayed a pitched battle in Cizre between heavily-armed combatants, Helsinki Watch received evidence quite to the contrary with respect to all or nearly all of casualties that took place in the town during Nevroz.

At nine a.m. on Saturday, March 21 (Nevroz day), crowds gathered at several points in town. They were heading toward the Cizre cemetery, where several hundred already had gathered to sing and dance and, in another Kurdish holiday custom, to pay homage to their dead, particularly their fallen (PKK) "martyrs." Estimates of the crowds' size vary, but the total number of civilians on the streets of Cizre that morning almost certainly exceeded 4,000, and may have been as high as double that figure.

Security forces did not erect barricades to block the routes leading to the cemetery. Instead, they deployed Panzers, "special forces" and gendarmes in such force that two crowds, separated by about seventy-five to one-hundred yards, decided not to advance further. The group closer to the cemetery, numbering about 1,000, knelt down in unison, waiting tensely. According to every eyewitness interviewed by Helsinki Watch, no one in any of the crowds displayed a gun,⁴ nor were Kurdish flags or pro-PKK banners visible in the streets leading to the cemetery. Indeed, according to two participants, when a few marchers unfurled a banner expressing pro-PKK sentiments, the crowd around them quickly made them roll the banner up so as to avoid provoking the police. And, with a few possible exceptions among the crowd that had already gathered at the cemetery, no one had covered or hidden his or her face (or otherwise dressed in the manner of a PKK guerrilla).

At nearly ten a.m., several journalists covering the events, seeing that the crowds were prevented from proceeding further, approached the officer who appeared to be in charge of the security forces guarding over the crowd closer to the cemetery, where the marchers were by now all kneeling in unison. They asked him why, in light of Prime Minister Demirel's statement permitting Kurds to celebrate Nevroz peacefully, his forces were impeding the crowd's progress to the cemetery. The officer responded: "They are acting illegally; they are carrying PKK flags and banners." Several journalists challenged him to point out any such flag or banner in the group assembled before him. The officer agreed that he saw none, but insisted that the marchers would, if permitted to proceed to the cemetery, display their banners there. The

⁴ In the Turkish southeast, as in many other largely rural parts of the Middle East, gun ownership is associated with masculinity and is far more common than Westerners might expect. The routine possession of guns by Kurdish men tends to blur the (already blurry) lines between PKK guerrillas, PKK militias and civilian PKK sympathizers and requires careful assessments of crowd behavior. The relevant question concerning a protest march, for example, is not so much "was the crowd armed?" – people often carry their pistols and, if the pistols are registered, that is neither illegal nor terribly alarming – but rather "did anyone display or aim a gun?" or perhaps "was anyone carrying a Kalashnikov?"

journalists urged him to radio his superiors for instructions, which he did. The response over the radio, which the journalists could hear, was to disperse the crowd.

At about this moment, the journalists heard gunshots and screams from the direction of the crowd that had stopped down the street, further from the cemetery. A resident of Cizre who was in the crowd where shots were first fired described what happened:

Two "special forces" men, both wearing blue berets, were standing directly in front of us. I think one was a lieutenant, the other a sergeant. Most of the people in the front were kneeling down. Someone told them [the officers] to let us go on. They were insulting us; it was very tense, and we were scared. A man stood up in the crowd and shouted, "if you need to kill someone, go ahead, shoot me." One of the "special forces" took his rifle and shot him, killed him right there. There were more shots, and chaos. I took off.

Immediately after the shooting began at this location, shots were heard and tear gas was launched near the crowd that had stopped up the street, closer to the cemetery. That crowd, too, dispersed in pandemonium. Eyewitnesses told Helsinki Watch that three or four civilians were killed by security forces at these two locations, and that another young man was killed several blocks away, as he was trying to reach his home. The autopsy found nine bullets in his body, all fired from close range. In all, not less than thirteen residents of Cizre were killed by shooting that morning; at least five were killed in the town center, and eight in the surrounding neighborhoods, where police also blocked Kurds from going to the cemetery. Approximately another fifty were injured.⁵

The significant point is that *none* of these casualties resulted from the heavy firing that commenced on both sides later that evening, and that continued again the following night, Sunday, March 22. Witnesses told Helsinki Watch that a rump group gathered near the cemetery shortly after the initial shootings on Saturday morning and were told by a masked organizer to go to their homes. There were no further marches, demonstrations or clashes on the streets of Cizre. Instead, during the next two days, principally at night, small and heavy weapons, including mortars and rocket-propelled grenades, were fired for hours on end (by whom, exactly, no one could say). During daylight, the Turkish forces patrolled the streets in force; at night they retreated, except for a few roaming tanks and Panzers. By Monday, March 23, the army and police were firmly in control of the town and, with very rare exceptions, the shooting had stopped. Remarkably, in all the heavy shooting that took place late on March 21 and again, in somewhat lesser degree, on the night of March 22, not a single person was reported killed. As far as Helsinki Watch could determine, virtually all of the fatalities occurred early on Nevroz day, March 21, and in not a single one of these cases did we receive any eyewitness evidence that security forces were responding to an armed attack.

⁵ The Diyarbakir branch of Turkey's independent Human Rights Association reports that twenty-seven civilians were killed in Cizre during Nevroz. Helsinki Watch could not confirm that figure, but rather received consistent reports of thirteen or fourteen killed on March 21, one other death, of a journalist, on March 23, and yet another death on March 23 or 24, when an unarmed sixteen-year-old boy was killed by the police as he left his home to buy bread in violation of a declared curfew. Hasim Hasimi, the mayor of Cizre, who was elected on the ticket of the fundamentalist Islamic *Rafah* (Welfare) party and is not known as a particularly pro-PKK figure, confirmed the reports we received of fifteen or sixteen killed in Cizre from March 21 to 24; these figures do not include, however, the tally from outlying villages.

Residents of Cizre and Turkish journalists claimed to Helsinki Watch, moreover, that had anyone in the crowds actually fired upon a policeman or soldier, they believe the security officers' response would have been even more violent and resulted in far higher casualties. According to several participants in the events, the military was so firmly in control of the streets, and had a reputation for such brutality towards the Kurds, that the demonstrators took great pains to avoid any provocation. Photographs of hundreds of people on their knees, huddling fearfully, tend to confirm this account.

Turkish officers have effectively conceded that police and soldiers were not provoked into firing by any genuine military threat or fear for their safety. Nadire Mater, an Istanbul-based correspondent for IPS (Inter Press Service) who was in Cizre during Nevroz, recounted the following interview:

At about noon [on March 21], I called the police station to ask how many were injured, how many killed. I was told that they didn't know, but that a curfew was imposed and we journalists were not to leave the hotel. At about 1 p.m., Akin Birdal [secretary general of the Human Rights Association in Ankara] and I decided to go the checkpoint in front of the hotel to talk to the police. We approached an armed plainclothesman who seemed to be in charge. I asked him why the police shot. He said: "We had to open fire." I asked, "Who ordered you to shoot?" He answered, "There is a hierarchy; it came from the top." I couldn't understand that, since the crowds were peaceful, so I asked, "Well, what did the people who ordered this know; what were they told?" He said: "That they [the demonstrators] were carrying flags and placards." At this point, Birdal disagreed, saying to the officer, "But we didn't see any." The man told us, "You're right, they didn't open any, but they were going to open them." And this was his explanation for the shooting.

Additional evidence of the grossly disproportionate force used against Cizre's residents during Nevroz comes from Unan Erkan, the "supergovernor" of the state of emergency zone; for all practical purposes, he is the supreme military and civilian authority in the southeastern region. Interviewed by Helsinki Watch, Governor Erkan claimed that security forces fired only after being fired upon first. When asked why, then, not one policeman or soldier had been injured, let alone killed, by gunfire in Cizre, he initially questioned that figure, and summoned an aide to bring him an intelligence briefing on the casualties. After reviewing his own report, Governor Erkan did not challenge our assertion, thus acknowledging that not one military or police officer was killed or wounded in Cizre during the Nevroz events.

In attempting to demonstrate that Turkish forces acted with restraint in Cizre and did not fire on the crowds without provocation, the Governor made an additional argument that has been repeated at the highest levels of the Turkish government. If the military actually fired at will into unarmed crowds, he argued, surely the casualty count would have been much higher than it was. Similarly, in an interview with Agence France-Press on April 9 of this year, Turkish President Turgut Ozal, speaking generally about Nevroz events throughout the Kurdish region, claimed that reports of "heavy machine-gunning at the crowd" were "wrong," adding that if the reports were true, there should "have been more dead than the fifty to sixty [actually, about eighty] announced." Helsinki Watch finds these arguments unpersuasive. To be sure, Turkish forces easily *could* have killed tens or hundreds more demonstrators than they actually did. But the fact that, say, 250 peaceful demonstrators were not killed by indiscriminate, unprovoked gunfire hardly disproves the fact that a substantially smaller number were killed by equally unjustified shootings. The

government's argument, moreover, sends a cynical and dangerous message to the Turkish military and police: We will look the other way when you kill innocent Kurds, it seems to suggest, so long as you do not kill too many at one time.

The killings by Turkish soldiers and policemen in Cizre on Nevroz day display a fundamental disregard for human life and the life of Kurds in particular -- and, as the incidents described below indicate, this deprecation of the value of life is all too common in southeastern Turkey. Even if the initial demonstrations in Cizre could be characterized as part of an "internal armed conflict" -- and we do not believe they can be -- Turkish forces violated the humanitarian standards applicable to such conflicts under international law by failing to differentiate between armed combatants and peaceful civilians, by applying military force that was grossly disproportionate to the military threat presented (if indeed there was any military threat at all), and by applying that force in a manner that would foreseeably result in unnecessary loss of civilian life. The army and police further violated international standards by actively preventing many of the wounded from receiving prompt medical attention. Several witnesses informed Helsinki Watch that, as ambulances rushed to the scene of the initial shootings, they were blocked by security forces, and one of the ambulance drivers was pulled from his vehicle and beaten severely.

The Turkish military's indifference to basic human rights and to the rules governing armed conflict is clearly illustrated by the death of Izzet Kezer, a Turkish journalist for *Sabah* newspaper who was killed in Cizre on Monday, March 23. That day, Kezer and a number of other foreign and Turkish journalists heard from their hotel what sounded to them like the automatic gunfire of a Panzer armed personnel carrier, followed by the screams of a woman and children. Seeking to investigate, Kezer and about eight other journalists, including two videocamera operators, decided to break curfew restrictions and left the hotel. When they approached the area from where they heard the shooting, the journalists heard more gunfire, and ducked into a house for safety. There they fashioned large white flags by ripping up a sheet and tying the torn pieces onto sticks. After waiting nearly an hour, and not hearing any further gunfire, the journalists ventured out slowly, waving their white flags high. According to four journalists who accompanied Kezer, and as confirmed by a videotape of the event shown to Helsinki Watch, there was no shooting to be heard as the journalists cautiously proceeded down the street holding up their flags. Suddenly, as Kezer (who was at the front of the group) reached an intersection, a rapid-fire gunburst erupted from the journalists' left. Kezer was killed instantly by a single bullet that hit him in the left side of the head. The rest of the group fell to the ground, and the same shooting sound continued. The journalists could see clearly the Turkish Panzer that was shooting at them; no other soldiers or police, and no PKK guerrillas, were anywhere in view, and they heard no other shooting. The surviving journalists scrambled along the ground to the nearest house and, when the door of that house opened to them, managed to get inside safely.

The eyewitness and photographic evidence received by Helsinki Watch demonstrates that Turkish forces, knowingly and without warning, shot in broad daylight at unarmed noncombatants who were openly declaring their peaceful intent with the universally-recognized symbol of the white flag. It is also likely, although not necessarily certain, that whoever was in the Panzer knew that these men were journalists; no PKK militias were roaming the streets by March 23, no one else was in sight, and the journalists were carrying cameras and videocameras and some were wearing reporters' vests. Governor Erkan claims that the incident still is "under investigation by the Turkish courts, which are independent." Yet Turkey's President Ozal already has declared that Turkish security forces are blameless in the incident.

Nusaybin

Nusaybin, a dusty town of about 50,000, sits hard by the Syrian border in an open plain. Its residents are overwhelmingly Kurdish and, like many other towns in southeastern Turkey, its population has swelled in recent years from an influx of villagers seeking to escape the disintegration of their rural peasant societies.

As in Cizre and Sirnak to the east, the PKK has a strong following in Nusaybin. In sharp contrast to the situation in those two towns, however, in Nusaybin, Nevroz itself was celebrated relatively uneventfully. On March 20, Nevroz eve, many townspeople gathered in small groups, dancing, singing and shooting their weapons harmlessly into the night sky. On Nevroz day, Saturday March 21st, several thousand Kurds, many of them dressed in the traditional red, yellow and green of the Kurdish flag, gathered in the town center and, although a few chanted pro-PKK slogans, the police did not interfere. By early afternoon, the crowds dispersed quietly -- so quietly, in fact, that the Turkish Minister of the Interior, Ismet Sezgin, in a state-wide broadcast, praised the townspeople of Nusaybin for the peaceful manner in which they celebrated the Kurdish holiday.

Turkish forces soon would shatter that peace. By nightfall on Saturday, reports began arriving in town of the violence and deaths in Cizre and Sirnak. On Sunday morning, March 22, a crowd of at least several hundred gathered to protest the state's actions. One local resident, a journalist, told Helsinki Watch that the crowd assembled spontaneously, by word of mouth passed from house to house. Nusaybin was particularly affected by the reports of violence, he said, because many of the townspeople had close family ties to the residents of Cizre. Another journalist, not a local resident but with reliable PKK contacts in the region, provided a different, yet not altogether inconsistent, explanation for the gathering. PKK sympathizers in Nusaybin, he said -- and, in varying degrees, they include a majority of the town -- were not only outraged by the events in Cizre and Sirnak, but were concerned that the Interior Minister's complimentary remarks reflected poorly on the intensity of their pro-nationalist, pro-PKK sentiment. PKK leaders in Nusaybin, this journalist continued, therefore organized a demonstration to show that their town was as much behind the Kurdish cause as the others.

Whatever the precise impetus, on Sunday morning, March 22, hundreds of Nusaybin residents gathered slowly on one side of the Carcag river with the intent of reaching Nevroz Square, on the other side of the river approximately a mile from the town center. Without exception, the eyewitnesses interviewed by Helsinki Watch said that none of the would-be demonstrators displayed any weapons or, for that matter, any Kurdish flags or pro-PKK banners. About a hundred townspeople, including women and children in large numbers, made their way onto the narrow bridge over the river, but their way was blocked by a single Panzer. The Panzer moved menacingly back and forth; the tense crowd on the bridge knelt down, waiting; behind them, townspeople continued to gather, blocking the rear of the bridge; and behind and to the side of the incoming crowd, in turn, stood several gendarmes and police officers, rifles and machine guns at the ready.

What happened next can only be described as a massacre.⁶ A Kurdish woman, not quite five feet

⁶ Describing the year's Nevroz events generally, Dagistan Toprak, a Kurd who is Secretary General of the Diyarbakir branch of the SHP, the smaller of two parties in Turkey's governing coalition, declined to adopt the term "massacre." Compared to far bloodier events in the Kurds' 70-year history of dealings with the modern Turkish state, the loss of

tall and appearing far older than her age of about fifty, described it this way:

My son and I were on the bridge, at the front of the crowd, sitting on our knees. The Panzer moved back, then forward, back, then forward. Suddenly, it came at us, very fast. There was no warning. I was on the far right, my son closer to the middle. As it came at us, the Panzer started firing, tu-tu-tu-tu-tu-tu. I tried to jump out of the way, but the wheels caught my dress; I yanked hard, ripped my dress, and scrambled down the embankment to the river. There were screams everywhere. I fled ... Eventually, I made my way home. I didn't know what happened to my son.

In fact, her son was hit, not by a bullet, but by the Panzer itself. A few of the injured were carried off by fleeing townspeople; the rest of the injured and the dead lay on the bridge; and soldiers prevented anyone from getting to the victims for another 1½ to 2½ hours after the shooting had stopped. How long the woman's son lay on the bridge is not known, but we were told by his brother how this teenage boy died:

I was not in the crowd, but when I heard what had happened, I went home ... About two hours later, I received word from friends that they had my brother, that he was injured. A friend and I went and got him. We tried to take him to the local hospital. The police wouldn't let us. They said, "Let him go and die in Cizre, like the rest of you dogs." ... We got a car and drove fast to Mardin (the provincial capital). My brother was conscious. He said "I'll be all right." He kept saying not to worry, but I knew he was hurt. We got to Mardin. The police wouldn't allow us in the hospital, so we drove to Diyarbakir (another provincial capital, and the largest city in southeastern Turkey). Outside of Mardin, we were stopped at a military checkpoint. They said we couldn't go on to Diyarbakir. I tried to explain that we were trying to get to the hospital, but it didn't matter to them. So, we turned around and took the back roads to Diyarbakir ... Blood started to come out my brother's ear and then he went unconscious. He died before we got to Diyarbakir. I was crying. But I'm not a doctor, and I wasn't sure he was dead. Finally, we got to the hospital at Diyarbakir. The doctors told me he died from loss of blood, from his injuries inside.

In all, twenty to twenty-four people were killed in and around Nusaybin on March 22, nearly twenty of them at the bridge. Three of the victims died when they jumped off the bridge into the shallow river and rocky riverbed below; their bodies were returned days later from Syria, where the river had carried them. Several families wanted to bury their dead at the cemetery on Monday, March 23, but the police denied permission. They were told that the bodies would be dumped into a mass grave unless they agreed to bury them that night, outside the cemetery. Only one family member of each victim was permitted to be present. Eleven victims were buried that way: a sole relative digging his or her grave in the middle of the night under the lights of a watching Panzer.

Unan Erkan, the regional Governor, acknowledged to Helsinki Watch that state forces in Nusaybin never were confronted with a substantial armed PKK threat during Nevroz or the following day. He refused to admit, however, that the Turkish military or police had acted improperly. He argued that the demonstration was illegal under Turkish law since no prior permission had been obtained (true); that the

"merely" eighty or so Kurdish lives in three days did not rank in his judgment as a massacre.

crowd could not be allowed to block the bridge or proceed to Nevroz Square and stage an illegal demonstration (a questionable tactical judgment, unsupported by any need to respond to a tangible military threat); and that the Panzer opened fire only after first being fired upon (an implausible assertion contradicted by every eyewitness Helsinki Watch interviewed, each of whom said no one in the crowd ever fired or even brandished any weapon). Yet even if the Governor's version of the Nusaybin events were credited, his explanation still would fail to justify in any way this overwhelmingly disproportionate, indiscriminate attack on a terrified mass of Kurdish men, women and children.

According to the Diyarbakir branch of the Human Rights Association, among the twenty or more slaughtered in Nusaybin on March 22 were Abdullah Afsin (52); Halil Bulut (age unknown); Serif Akguc (29); Huseyin Bilat (age unknown); Mahmut Ciftci (28); Ahmet Kaya (61); A. Baki Gunduz (27); Ibrahim Erger (age unknown); Hikmet Aslan (16); Osman Duman (52); Aliye Er (age unknown); and Halil Babek (12).⁷ Some fifty-two townspeople, including a five-year-old child, were injured. The total count of police and military officers killed or wounded in Nusaybin on March 21, 22 and 23: zero.

Conclusions

During Nevroz 1992, a dramatic number of Kurds were killed and wounded in a concentrated period of time. It would be a mistake, however, to see Nevroz as an anomaly, as an exception to the usual means by which Turkish security forces deal with the slightest sign of Kurdish dissent, or to the brutal treatment they customarily mete out to Kurdish civilians in southeastern Turkey.⁸ The following incidents reported by the Ankara-based Human Rights Foundation are merely illustrative of countless others in a pattern of systematic violence by the Turkish state against its disfavored citizens:

- In mid-March, about a week before Nevroz, twelve Kurds were killed in a small village near Dargecit, in the province of Mardin. The government's official statement announced that Turkish forces killed twelve "PKK guerrillas" in an armed battle. In fact, according to S.S., a seven-year old girl who survived the incident, soldiers came to her house and ransacked the place, searching for weapons. Finding none, the soldiers went up to the roof and threw a bomb or grenade down a chimney-like opening, killing everyone in the house except her. The "PKK guerrillas" who were

⁷ Because some of the victims or their relatives may be local PKK militants or organizers, and their identification might expose their families to inordinate risk of retaliation by Turkish authorities, local residents and human rights organizations frequently omit the names of certain casualties from the lists of dead and wounded they compile.

⁸ Indeed, Helsinki Watch receives almost daily reports of violence and bloodshed in towns throughout the Turkish southeast, and on occasion the fatalities in these incidents may actually exceed the highest reported death count from any one municipality during Nevroz (twenty-five, in Sirnak). On April 15 and 16 in the villages around Bismil, for example, thirty-eight people were killed by security forces. The PKK claimed that thirty of the dead were PKK members, and eight were simply local villagers. After arranging the bodies for a televised display, the Turkish army dumped them all into a mass grave; hundreds of villagers then proceeded to exhume the bodies and wash them in preparation for burial in accordance with local custom. This episode (and others) is recounted in the report of a human rights delegation headed by Lord Avebury, Chair of the Parliamentary Human Rights Group of the British Parliament, which visited southeastern Turkey from April 15 to April 22 of this year. That delegation's findings concerning the Nevroz events are consistent with the findings of Helsinki Watch.

killed consisted entirely of her father, brothers and sisters.

- **On April 9, a fifteen-year-old boy detained by security forces was hospitalized with first-degree burns after being made to lie on top of burning coals outside another small village near Dargecit. According to the boy, "they pointed at the burning coal fire and said they would throw me on the fire unless I gave them my gun. When I told them I had no gun they undressed me and forced me to lie on the burning coals. I don't remember the rest." Three other members of the boy's family were tortured the same day; two of them had to be hospitalized.**

- **Biseng Anik, a sixteen-year-old girl, was detained by security forces on March 25 during their house-to-house sweep of Sirnak following the unrest that took place in that city; Anik died in detention on March 28. Sirnak governor Mustafa Malay provided the following "explanation" of her death: "When custody rooms are crowded, some detainees are put in other rooms to testify. Along with the girl who committed suicide there were also two other girls. Therefore, Biseng Anik was taken to another room used by security forces. In that room, she committed suicide with a gun she found under the bed. The autopsy reports show that she committed suicide."⁹**

- **On April 6, two villagers from the Malatya district, travelling en route to prayer ceremonies, were shot at and killed when they reportedly ignored police commands to stop. One of the men was seventy years old, the other seventy-five.**

We found no reason to believe that any of these incidents, or numerous similar ones, would be investigated seriously by Turkish authorities or would lead to prosecutions of the responsible parties. The impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of these abuses strongly suggests that such abuses are consistent with official governmental policy towards the Kurds, or at least the policy of the Turkish armed forces which effectively control the region.

Turkish authorities routinely deny to the outside world the existence of any such official policy, but they are not so guarded about expressing their true feelings to their own Kurdish citizens. Leyla Zana is a member of the Turkish parliament who has been at the head of the Kurdish peoples' peaceful efforts to secure greater autonomy and protection of their rights; her husband, the former mayor of Diyarbakir, was imprisoned for nearly ten years, and was thrown back in jail recently after a brief release. On April 18, Zana and Orhan Dogan, another Kurdish member of Turkey's parliament, travelled to the village of Tepe, near Bismil about thirty miles east of Diyarbakir, to investigate the conflict that resulted in thirty-eight deaths a few days earlier.¹⁰ Zana and Dogan were followed to Tepe village by Colonel Ismet Yediyildiz, commander of the gendarmerie in Diyarbakir, who arrived by helicopter before transferring to a car. As Leyla Zana recounted:

⁹ **Helsinki Watch interviewed several individuals who have been detained at one time or another; all of them considered preposterous the notion of a gun lying about in a detention cell unguarded. A Kurdish politician interviewed by Helsinki Watch asked a local military official how this could have happened in a detention cell. He answered, "Maybe a policeman left it [the gun] there." Pressed further about this apparently serious breach of security procedures, the official acknowledged that no investigation of the policeman's conduct was contemplated.**

¹⁰ **See footnote 8 above. Also in Tepe that day were members of Lord Avebury's human rights delegation who witnessed the event we are about to describe.**

I arrived by car. We interviewed the local governor, and went with him to the village. The local governor agreed with us that he would withdraw the gendarmes and that the families would be permitted to bury their dead. On the way to the cemetery, gendarmes blocked our car; the governor ordered them to withdraw, which they did, and the village families went to the cemetery. At this point, Colonel Yediyildiz arrived and got out of his car. First he insulted the local governor by saying to him "Why did you let these terrorists [referring to Zana and Dogan, both MPsi] come to the village?" He then turned to us and demanded to know what we were doing there. I said, "These people are having problems." The Colonel answered, "These are your people; they are our enemies." Orhan [Dogan] interjected, "My colonel ..." but before he could finish, the Colonel snapped: "I am not *your* Colonel." And then he continued: "I had come here to drink blood, but you have ruined my plans. I know that drinking blood is not a humanitarian sentiment, but I am satisfied when I drink your blood... I am going to kill you here." I told him that if my death would be a solution, I was ready to die. The Colonel answered, "Yes, we'll find a solution. In a short while, we'll kill all of you." I asked him, "Could Saddam [Hussein] solve the problem by killing 5,000 at Halabja [where Kurds were attacked by Iraqi troops using poison gas]?" "It will be solved in the near future," the Colonel said, "you have three more months." After we left Bismil town, we heard that three people were arrested, and two were killed by torture.

In reporting on the systematic human rights violations committed by Turkish security forces in the southeast region of Turkey, Helsinki Watch in no way seeks to condone the increasingly frequent abuses committed by the PKK and its armed followers in the area. A week rarely goes by without reports that the PKK has summarily executed village guards (local residents armed by the state and appointed to maintain order in their village) or killed unarmed residents believed to be state informers or agents. To cite just one example, on April 8 in Nusaybin, two women from the same family, one in her seventies and the other just twelve, were gunned down by PKK militants who accused them of belonging to the "Hezbollah" -- a shadowy new organization, believed by many to be funded and supported by the Turkish military, that has been involved in numerous mysterious killings of Kurds in recent months.

Nevertheless, the extent of human rights violations committed by the PKK, and its violations of the norms governing internal armed conflicts, appear to be significantly exaggerated by the Turkish government, which blames the PKK for almost every act of violence against Kurdish residents in the region, even where the casualties result from Kurds shooting Kurds for reasons entirely unrelated to the current political strife. The mainstream Turkish press, reluctant to criticize the government on issues involving the Kurds, routinely accepts the official version of events in the southeast without much independent examination or analysis. As a result, most major newspapers (and certainly the state-controlled television outlets) tend to overstate the extent of PKK terrorism while largely ignoring the more pervasive campaign of terror that the Turkish state is waging against its Kurdish population.¹¹

¹¹ Journalists who depart from the official version of events involving the Kurds are subject to intense, ongoing harassment, including death threats, detention and even assassination. Newspapers and magazines that report on the Turkish army's human rights violations against the Kurds are routinely censored; out of the first thirty-five weekly editions of *Yeni Ülke* (New Land) that were published, for example, twenty were taken off the newsstands.

Helsinki Watch believes that the PKK bears some limited responsibility for the tragic and bloody events that occurred in Cizre, Sirmak and Nusaybin during Nevroz. Months before Nevroz, its leaders publicly announced that Nevroz would be the beginning of a mass "uprising" by the Kurds, and called on Kurdish citizens to "revolt." By the time Nevroz arrived, however, these same leaders, aware that the state had responded to the challenge by bringing overwhelming forces and firepower to the region, appear to have adjusted PKK strategy so as to encourage and organize peaceful mass demonstrations in highly-populated urban centers. In doing so, the PKK was urging defenseless civilians to place themselves on the firing line in large numbers, presumably to demonstrate to the Turkish authorities the depth of the PKK's popular support. The PKK either underestimated the state's willingness to fire on peaceful demonstrators, or it cynically adopted this strategy in the belief that the state would react violently and thus escalate the tension, leading to further PKK support within southeastern Turkey and perhaps abroad as well. In either case, the PKK showed a willingness to subordinate to its own strategic interests any concern it might have had for the preservation of innocent civilian life.

None of this in any way excuses the actions of the Turkish military and police forces, which were directly responsible for almost every casualty that took place during Nevroz. Security forces shot at peaceful demonstrators, they attacked them with Panzers, they then prevented the wounded from receiving medical help, and they denied the families of the victims a decent burial for their dead. In Cizre and Nusaybin in particular, there was no violent struggle between two more or less equally matched combatants, but simply a gruesome slaughter of helpless Kurds. Ironically, Turkish officials vehemently deny the accuracy of the popular slogan, "PKK equals the people; the people equals PKK." Yet during Nevroz, Turkish forces seemed to be guided by precisely that maxim -- shooting on unarmed citizens just as they might have shot at heavily-armed PKK guerrillas. Adding to the irony, Turkey's response to the Kurds' demonstrations during Nevroz, like its response to most expressions of Kurdish discontent over the past several years, will only polarize the Kurdish population and further solidify the PKK's already substantial support among Kurds in southeastern Turkey.

The U.S. Role

On March 24, State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler provided the United States' official response to the Nevroz violence:

[W]e welcome the Turkish government's efforts to act with restraint in response to P.K.K. terrorist provocations, and we urge that every possible step be taken to avoid the death or injury of innocent citizens.

By describing peaceful demonstrations as "terrorist provocations," and praising the Turkish government's "restraint" in a situation in which about eighty civilian demonstrators were killed and hundreds more were wounded, the United States only encourages Turkey to continue its repressive, inhumanitarian policies towards the Kurds. The United States' position is in sharp contrast to that of other countries (notably Germany) which loudly condemned the Turkish government's misuse of force, and to the reaction of the European Parliament, which on April 9 passed a resolution charging Turkey with violating the fundamental rights of innocent civilians.

The United States has an ongoing responsibility towards the Kurds by virtue of its unusually close relationship with Turkey. Turkey is one of the leading recipients of U.S. foreign aid, much of which takes the form of military assistance and training. Especially since Turkey's willingness during the Gulf War to permit attacks upon Iraq from its territory, the United States has grown increasingly supportive of the Turkish government -- President Bush has gone so far as to declare Turkey his "second home."

Helsinki Watch once again urges the United States government to speak out forcefully for the protection of human rights in Turkey, and certainly not to commend the Turkish government when it violates those rights on a massive scale. In addition, the U.S administration and Congress should promptly determine whether, in light of the Turkish government's actions, continued financial and military assistance to Turkey is consistent with United States human rights laws and policies.

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This report was written by David E. Nachman, an attorney in New York. On behalf of Helsinki Watch, Mr. Nachman conducted a mission to Ankara, southeastern Turkey and Istanbul from April 26 to May 2 of this year. Helsinki Watch wishes to thank S.G., who provided invaluable assistance during the mission.

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