

26 October 2009

## Turkey:

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# Need for continued improvement in response to protracted displacement

*Around one million internally displaced people (IDPs) in Turkey continue to face protracted displacement, with many obstacles still standing in the way of durable solutions. Prevailing insecurity in south-eastern Turkey, the continuing presence of village guard militias and of mines, and under-development continue to bar their return. Integration in urban areas is still fraught with difficulties in the absence of targeted assistance, as IDPs, most of them Kurdish, face socio-economic marginalisation and discrimination.*

*However the government has taken notable steps to address the internal displacement situation. In the last four years, it has commissioned a national survey on the number and conditions of IDPs; drafted a national IDP strategy; adopted a law on compensation; and put together a comprehensive pilot action plan in Van Province which addresses rural and urban situations of displacement.*

*The Van pilot is now to be replicated in 13 other provinces affected by displacement, and form the basis of national action plan that would provide a comprehensive response to displacement in south-eastern provinces. However gaps persist in the response, both for IDPs in the south-east and for those displaced in other parts of Turkey.*

*The issue of the place of Kurdish people in Turkey dominates the situation of displacement, and in recent years the government has taken limited but unprecedented steps to address the Kurdish question. These steps are still fraught with challenges, but this approach, if continued, has the potential to reconcile Turkish society and favourably affect the national response to displacement.*

# Map of Turkey



Source: General Libraries, University of Texas at Austin  
More maps are available on <http://www.internal-displacement.org>

## Background and main causes

Between 1984 and 1999, conflict between the Turkish army and Kurdish militants displaced around one million people, mainly Kurds, from their homes in south-eastern Turkey. The conflict, which is believed to have claimed tens of thousands of lives, originated to a large extent from government policies that for decades denied the existence of a distinctive Kurdish identity in Turkey. Beginning in the 1970s, a number of Kurdish political groups including the Kurdish Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, or PKK) began to actively protest against this policy. In 1984, the PKK launched attacks against the Turkish state, with the declared intention of establishing an independent Kurdish state (Kirisci, January 1998). In 1987, government security forces were granted exceptional powers under a state of emergency, which was declared in 14 provinces and led to a heavy military presence, the imposition of martial law and severe restrictions on civil and political rights.

Internal displacement was caused by the evacuation of villages by the government under the emergency rule, by the PKK when villagers refused to support it, and by the lack of security for those caught in the fighting (Kirisci, January 1998). The PKK and also the security forces (including paramilitaries of the government's village guard system) committed serious human rights violations including torture, arbitrary arrests, abductions, and the destruction of villages and crops. The 14 provinces most affected by internal displacement were Bingol, Hakkari, Tunceli, Bitlis, Van, Mus, Elazig, Adiyaman, Agri, Diyarbakir, Batman, Siirt, Mardin, and Sirnak.

After the arrest of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in June 1999, and his subsequent announcement of a unilateral cessation of armed activities by Kurdish armed groups, the level of violence in south-eastern Turkey sharply decreased, and the state of emergency was gradually lifted in all provinces.

However, despite renewed ceasefires by the PKK, violence has increased in recent years, although not to preceding levels. In June 2007 the government declared the provinces of Siirt, Sirnak and Hakkari, as "temporary security zones", deployed more troops along the border with Iraq, and authorised provincial governors to extend the number of village guards (TESEV, August 2007). In the course of late 2007 and 2008, the Turkish armed forces repeatedly intervened in northern Iraq, targeting PKK military bases which were reported as the source of escalation. The interventions caused the displacement of close to a thousand Iraqis (IDMC, December 2008; ICG, December 2008).

At the same time the government has taken preliminary steps to address the Kurdish question, to which issues of internal displacement remain intricately intertwined. Steps such as a declared willingness to discuss the situation of the Kurds have however been tempered by continued vigilance and application of laws which restrict fundamental freedoms and human rights (ICG, December 2008).

Most IDPs in Turkey were displaced by the conflict in the 1980s and 1990s, but their movement has also been affected by a broader rural-to-urban migration, encouraged by both the violence and the socio-economic marginalisation of the region. Large-scale development projects

within the South-Eastern Anatolia Project (GAP) have also raised concerns over the displacement they could cause; for example the planned construction of the Iliyal dam project could displace between 50,000 and 78,000 people, mainly Kurds (KHRP, May 2009). Urbanisation projects in cities such as Istanbul and Ankara have also led to demolitions of Roma areas, adding these to the numbers of displaced (CoE, October 2009; MRG, March 2009; ERRC April 2008). Natural disasters also cause major displacements; in 1999, an earthquake in northern Turkey killed around 18,000 people and displaced over 675,000 (IFRC, 2004).

### **Displacement figures**

For many years the numbers of IDPs has been contested, with estimates ranging from 350,000 to four million. A government estimate of 350,000 included only people evacuated by security forces, and not those who were forced to flee due to generalised violence or a combination of security and economic reasons. In 2004 the government commissioned a national IDP survey from the Hacettepe University Institute for Population Studies. The survey showed in December 2006 that between around 950,000 and 1.2 million people had been displaced for security-related reasons from the east and south-east of the country between 1986 and 2005 (HUNEE, December 2006). However, nearly three years on, these findings are yet to be clearly endorsed by all relevant government institutions (General Directorate, GoY, June 2009).

Nearly half of the IDP population remain in south-east Turkey close to their places of origin, while the other half have moved to western and northern Turkey to

such cities as Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir (TESEV, May 2009).

The number of returnees has remained quite low, despite a series of government programmes such as the Return to Village and Rehabilitation Project (RVRP) launched in 1994. According to statistics collected in the 14 provinces in which the RVRP has been implemented, a little over 150,000 people had returned to their places of origin as of July 2009. The figure was the same in 2007 (GoT/UN Mission, June 2007; GoT October 2009), while the Hacettepe survey estimated 124,000 returnees in 2006. They represented only between ten and 13 per cent of those displaced, although more than half of IDPs had reported a wish to return to their areas of origin (HUNEE, December 2006; GoT/UN Mission, June 2007). Many displaced villagers do reportedly return temporarily, usually in summer months, but no clear figures are available (HRW, March 2005; TESEV, August 2007).

### **Obstacles to return in south-eastern Turkey**

Outstanding obstacles to sustainable return include the upsurge in violence between the Turkish army and Kurdish militants since 2004 in south-eastern provinces, the continuing presence of around 69,000 village guards and close to a million landmines in provinces bordering Syria and Iraq, and the under-development of the region.

Although security in the south-east has greatly improved since the 1990s, armed clashes between government forces and the PKK have increased since 2004, when the PKK announced the end of a five-year ceasefire, and particularly in the

last three years, discouraging returns and even threatening new displacement (TESEV, May 2009). Meanwhile the government has continued since 2007 to renew “temporary security zones”. Since 2007, human rights activists have reported more restrictions of their freedom of movement, including road blocks and checkpoints during military operations, as well as arbitrary detentions and allegations of extrajudicial killings (KHRP, June 2008, and August 2009; HRA, September 2009; US DoS, March 2007).

The village guards system, whose members were often implicated in the original causes of displacement, remains a significant obstacle to return. Village guards have hindered return by denying displaced villagers access to their fields and by occupying people’s homes or land, while they have been responsible for killings and acts of intimidation (TESEV/IDMC, June 2006; HRW, June 2006). There are some 57,000 paid village guards, in addition to an estimated 12,000 volunteers (TESEV, May 2009). Although the government announced in 2005 that it was considering the gradual dissolution of the system, and recognised in its national IDP strategy the risk it posed to returnees, it has made no progress in abolishing the village guards (UN CHR, April 2005; GoT, August 2005). In May 2007, the government introduced a new law according to which governors may increase the number of village guards in their provinces.

The killing of 40 civilians by village guards in Mardin Province in early 2009 revealed the dangers of this paramilitary group to the Turkish public (Open Democracy, May 2009). Meanwhile, international bodies have continued to call for

their disbandment (EC, November 2008; CoE, October 2009).

Landmines were widely deployed by all parties and they continue to present a security concern and a barrier to return. Landmines are reportedly present near evacuated villages and in particular along the borders with Iraq and Syria (TESEV August 2007; LMG July 2006). The government acknowledged the problem in the national IDP strategy framework in 2005, and in May 2006 estimated that there were just under a million mines in the country (GoT, 2005; LMG, July 2006). Estimates of the number of casualties they caused between 1993 and 2004 ranged from 1,600 to 2,900 (GoT, October 2009; LMG, May 2008). Though the government has undertaken demining activities, civil society organisations have called for much greater efforts in mine risk education, treatment for victims, and more systematic marking of mined areas (CoE, October 2009; IDMC/TESEV, June 2006). In July 2006, the PKK also committed itself to a ban on use of anti-personnel mines, but the government has since repeatedly accused it of continuing to use landmines (GoT, October 2009).

### **Social and economic obstacles to rural return**

National and international researchers have reported that the lack of economic opportunities, social services and basic infrastructure in the rural areas of the south-east from which the majority of IDPs originate constitute a major obstacle to return. There has been an overall absence of development in former conflict areas suffering from inadequate basic infrastructure (HRW, March 2005; CoE, October 2009), and the “serious state of

economic and social underdevelopment constitutes a serious obstacle to voluntary return” (CoE, October 2009). Access to education and levels of educational achievement in the south-east are reportedly far below the national average, unemployment rates are very high and livelihood opportunities limited, particularly for women (MRG, March 2009; CoE, October 2009).

Case studies have illustrated complex challenges facing returnees. Arable land and homes which have been destroyed in the conflict or else left unattended for nearly two decades must be rebuilt from scratch in areas which were already facing socio-economic difficulties prior to displacement (MRG, December 2006; Sonmez, September 2008). The existing infrastructure was often a small village consisting of isolated hamlets with limited facilities at best (Sonmez, September 2008). Despite the implementation of several projects to facilitate returns, the assistance provided has often been reported as insufficient. For instance, returnees in Aydinlik in Batman Province received unfinished housing upon return or were compelled to live in dilapidated housing (TESEV, August 2007). Reports suggest high levels of indebtedness among returnees resorting to daily labour and seasonal work while attempting to reconstruct their livelihoods (TESEV, August 2007).

### **Protracted displacement in urban areas**

Most programmes have focused on return and the government has only recently acknowledged the situation of IDPs living in urban areas, many of whom remain unidentified (UN CHR, November 2002;

MRG, March 2009; TESEV May 2009). The government has not assisted or facilitated their integration even though the national survey revealed that nearly half of IDPs did not wish to return, and that 17 per cent had had no land and 12 per cent had not owned a residence prior to their displacement (HUNEE, December 2006). Several studies have also indicated generational differences, with younger IDPs not intending to return to rural places of origin in which opportunities remain limited (Sonmez, September 2008; TESEV, August 2007).

Most displaced people have been living for nearly ten years on the peripheries of cities including Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir and Adana, as well as in cities in the south-east such as Batman, Diyarbakir, Hakkari and Van (Kirisci, January 1998; TESEV, August 2007). They share with other migrants the problems of poverty, but also face discrimination and limited access to housing, education and health facilities (EC, November 2008; TESEV August 2007; MRG, March 2009; Sonmez, September 2008). Problems particularly identified among forcibly displaced communities include prevalent trauma, low levels of education, and high levels of unemployment, particularly among displaced women. Child labour and domestic violence is reported to be an increasing problem in urban centres (MRG, March 2009; TESEV, August 2007).

A number of government programmes target the wider poorer population, but do not take into consideration the specific situation of the displaced community (MRG, March 2009). For instance, one criteria for determining poverty and eligibility for social assistance is not owning agricultural property. IDPs who own

rural property would be disqualified even if they have been unable to access their property for nearly a decade (IDMC/TESEV, June 2006).

### **Towards a national action plan**

While the government response in the 1990s was generally inadequate, there was a significant shift in national policy following the visit of the Representative of the UN Secretary-General on IDPs (the RSG on IDPs) in 2002, which coincided with Turkey's bid to meet the conditions of EU membership after being recognised in 1999 as an EU candidate country. The government has since made important progress towards improving the overall national policy and legal frameworks and identifying and facilitating durable solutions for IDPs.

The RVRP was launched in 1994 to establish the necessary social and economic infrastructure to provide sustainable livelihoods for returnees. Between 1999 and 2008 the government invested \$54 million on infrastructure, social projects and assistance to returnees. A further \$10 million was allocated to the RVRP for 2009 (GoT, October 2009).

Nevertheless the RVRP had been extensively criticised on many grounds, including an overall lack of transparency or clear strategy and a lack of consultation with IDPs. The return policy was also found to be inconsistent, underfinanced and discriminatory (HRW, January 2004; EC, November 2003; TESEV, May 2009). The national survey in 2005 revealed that 88 per cent of returnees surveyed had returned without assistance from the government and that nearly half

of them were not aware of the assistance available (HUNEE, December 2006).

In 2004, the Law on Compensation was enacted, and in subsequent years amendments and procedural guidelines were adopted to improve its implementation. In 2005 the government adopted a national IDP strategy in which it committed to address the IDP situation in line with the international standards contained in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. In September 2006, Van Province launched a pilot strategic policy framework for IDPs, the Van Action Plan (VAP), based on consultation with civil society (GoT, October 2006). The plan is to be replicated in all other 13 provinces affected by displacement in south-eastern Turkey, and form an integral part of a National Action Plan. The National Plan is to be completed by end of 2009 once all 13 provincial plans are finalised. Finally, a national legislative framework to address displacement is to be finalised in 2010 (UNDP, September 2009).

The VAP represents the latest response to calls by the international community for a more systematic approach to enabling durable solutions for IDPs. It recognises the need to address urban displacement as well as facilitate returns according to the Guiding Principles. Developed with UNDP technical support, it is a blueprint to be replicated subject to the requirements of each province, and complements rather than replaces the RVRP (TESEV, May 2009). As of December 2007, 84 planned projects (requiring funding of close to \$72 million) were submitted to relevant national ministries, 44 of which are still being negotiated in 2009 (GoT/UN Mission, July 2007; TESEV May 2009).

Despite the VAP's emphasis on a participatory approach, many civil society associations have criticised the discrepancy between the final Plan and the outcomes of initial consultations (TESEV, May 2009). It has also been criticised for failing to acknowledge the Kurdish issue, and the issues of landmines, ongoing violence, and the threat presented by the village guard system. Furthermore, the provincial action plans from which the National Action Plan is to be developed do not address the situation of urban displacement outside the south-east.

Though their relations with the government have improved, civil society associations have continued to call for wider transparency and cooperation, and the opportunity to participate more meaningfully and systematically in the development of national and provincial plans of action (IDMC/TESEV, June 2006; TESEV May 2009). Although the Ministry of the Interior in February 2007 designated its General Directorate of Provincial Administration as responsible for all IDP-related policies and programmes, civil society associations have continued to call for clear focal points within the government to exclusively address displacement. The European Commission has echoed these calls in underlining the government's insufficient institutional capacity to address displacement (EC, November 2008).

### **Extension of the Compensation Law**

In 2004, the government adopted Law 5233 on "the Compensation of Losses Resulting from Terrorist Acts and the Measures Taken Against Terrorism" in favour of those who had suffered loss or

damage as a result of "action by terrorist organisations and measures taken by the government to combat it" since 1987 (GoT, July 2004). Compensation is provided for three types of damage: (i) loss of immovable and moveable properties; (ii) physical injuries, disabilities and death; (iii) access to property which has been restricted or hindered due to counter-terrorism measures. The law is implemented by 105 Damage Assessment Commissions (DACs) established in 75 provinces (GoT, October 2009; GoT/UN Mission, 2009). From 2004 to August 2009, slightly over 360,000 applications were made to the DACs, of which over 190,000 were decided, with 120,000 awarded compensation and the remaining 70,000 denied. Around \$1.4 billion of compensation had been awarded, of which nearly \$1.1 billion had been paid (GoT, October 2009).

Experts have drawn attention to a number of problems in the law and its implementation. These include the lack of independence of DACs; the absence of effective appeals procedures; the unwarranted burden of proof on applicants; the lack of a witness protection programme or of legal aid provision; and inconsistent and inequitable application of the law resulting in uneven results and levels of compensation (HRW, December 2006; IDMC/TESEV, June 2006; RSG on IDPs, March 2006). The law also does not address non-pecuniary damages and does not apply to people displaced prior to 1987 (HRW, March 2005; TESEV August 2007). Critics have also noted the failure of the government in raising awareness of the law – the 2006 survey revealed that close to half of IDPs were unaware of the law.

The government has made successive amendments to respond to some of these shortcomings (GoT, July and August 2005, and December 2006). The time-scale for implementing the law has been extended annually, most recently in September 2009 for a period of one year to allow DACs to process remaining applications (GoT, October 2009). In September 2005 the government issued procedural guidelines to alleviate the burden of proof on applicants in line with the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruling in the case of *Doğan and others v. Turkey* (ECtHR, June 2004). In 2007, the Ministry of the Interior issued guidance on award levels to the DACs to address the problem of inequitable application of the law. The Ministry also sought legal advice from international experts, provided training to the DACs, and developed a database to standardise and harmonise their decisions (GoT/Mission, June 2007). A monitoring and oversight mechanism was established within the Ministry to oversee implementation of these measures.

However, difficulties persist in the implementation of the law. In 2006, the ECtHR ruled in *İçyer v. Turkey* that the existing law provided adequate domestic remedy, leading to the dismissal of 1,500 pending cases relevant to compensation (ECtHR, February 2006; EC, November 2006). A report by Human Rights Watch noted that the ECtHR's decision was followed by a noticeable deterioration in the implementation of the compensation law. The report found that the DAC increasingly appeared to apply "arbitrary and unjust" criteria in calculating compensation, resulting in low compensation awards in numerous cases (HRW, December 2006). In its annual progress re-

port, the European Commission noted continued shortcomings in the law, in particular uneven and inequitable calculation of compensation between provinces, as well as delays in assessment and payment of compensation due to a lack of capacity of DACs (EC, November 2008).

### **Challenges of addressing the Kurdish question**

The vast majority of IDPs are Kurdish, and their displacement and current situation is tied to the lack of recognition of the Kurdish identity. In the last few years, the government has taken a number of unprecedented steps towards a "democratic opening" to address the Kurdish issue which could have significant bearing on the response to displacement (Hürriyet, August 2009; ICG, December 2008). Tensions however persist. Following the electoral gains in March 2009 of the Kurdish Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, or DTP) in south-eastern Turkey, the harassment and arrest of party members and elected officials was reported (KHRP, August 2009). Human rights associations have also condemned continued discrimination, and the use of existing legislation in stifling freedoms. This includes disproportionate measures adopted to quell and prosecute pro-Kurdish demonstrators, including children, under anti-terror legislation (HRA, April and September 2009).

This is in a context of repeated calls from civil society to address the issue of past human rights violations against Kurds including IDPs, and to end the current impunity of state actors including village guards (IDMC/TESEV, June 2006; HRW, December 2008). In late 2008, several unprecedented, albeit limited,

steps were taken at provincial level to investigate the remains of some of the many people who “disappeared” at the height of the conflict and bring to account those responsible (ICG, December 2008; KHRP, August 2009; BBC September 2009).

### **Response of the international community**

The government’s progress in addressing internal displacement has been heavily influenced by regional and international actors. The 2002 visit of the RSG on IDPs brought national attention to the issue and resulted in a series of recommendations to the government (UN CHR, November 2002). The current RSG has maintained this dialogue, visiting Turkey on four occasions between 2005 and 2006; he has both applauded the progress made and called on the government to address outstanding gaps in the response.

Turkey was recognised as an EU candidate country in 1999. In successive reports assessing Turkey’s progress in fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria, the EU has called on the government to address the situation of IDPs, drawing attention to obstacles to return and calling for the improvement of socio-economic conditions in the south-east (EC, November 2008). The EU has also been pivotal in putting the issue of minority rights, including the rights of the Kurdish displaced population, on the political agenda (BBC, September 2004).

The ECtHR has drawn on the Guiding Principles to underline the government’s primary duty and responsibility to provide durable solutions (ECtHR, June 2004). It has ruled against the Turkish

state in a large number of cases for its involvement in the forced displacement, particularly regarding property destruction and disappearances, including where perpetrated by village guards (HRW, June 2006; Juristras, Fall 2008). The Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers and the EU have both repeated the call for Turkey to comply with the ECtHR judgments on a wide range of human rights abuses and have called for numerous steps to widen freedoms, particularly those of expression and minorities, in compliance with international standards (EC, November 2008, ICG, December 2008; CoE, June 2005; CoE, October 2009).

The Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly has issued recommendations and reports relating specifically to internal displacement. Most recently, the Commissioner on Human Rights, following a visit in July 2009, underlined his concerns over the situation of large number of IDPs who remained trapped in a situation of protracted displacement, and urged Turkey to make more efforts to effectively protect and promote IDPs’ right to return to their homes or provide them with other durable solutions such as local integration or resettlement (CoE, October 2009). While noting Turkey’s efforts to date, the Commissioner underlined the need to accelerate the implementation of action plans, and address key issues such as the village guard system, limitations of the compensation law, and social and economic needs.

The United Nations country team’s response to displacement is represented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) project entitled “Support to the development of an IDP programme

in Turkey”. The project originally ran from 2005 to 2006, but was subsequently extended to help the government formulate a coherent and comprehensive National Action Plan for IDPs and develop a national legislative framework (UNDP, August 2008 *and* September 2009). UNDP has provided technical advice to the government, and facilitated participatory consultation with IDPs and civil society in the development of the Van Action Plan. It is currently replicating this process for subsequent provincial action plans. Other UN agencies such as UNICEF address situations of displacement indirectly through general development programmes (UNICEF, October 2009).

Several non-governmental bodies address the situation of IDPs and attempt to facilitate durable solutions. However, Turkish civil society has struggled to operate in a highly charged political environment (IDMC interview, October 2009).

Civil society associations, while supporting the role of the UN in addressing displacement, have raised concerns that the UN has confined itself to a technical role and not sufficiently advocated on pivotal issues, undermining the effectiveness of the VAP and subsequent provincial plans (Interview IDMC, October 2009; TESEV, May 2009). Several NGOs have underlined that the role of UNDP should be rather in monitoring the effectiveness of the government’s response and its compliance with international standards, and advocating on behalf of the displaced community (Interview IDMC, October 2009; TESEV, May 2009).

*Note: This is a summary of IDMC’s new internal displacement profile on Turkey. The full profile is available online [here](#).*

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## **About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre**

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at [www.internal-displacement.org](http://www.internal-displacement.org).

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