

URGENT ACTION

FULLY OPEN GALATASARAY SQUARE

On 11 November, after over five years of being banned, 10 representatives of Saturday Mothers/People, a group of relatives of victims of enforced disappearances and other human rights defenders, were allowed to read a short statement in front of the Galatasaray High School near the Galatasaray Square in Istanbul, Türkiye. The square is a place of symbolic importance to the group. This positive development is welcome but still falls short of the full implementation of the Constitutional Court decisions that concluded the applicants' rights to freedom of peaceful assembly had been violated and that the authorities should prevent the reoccurrence of the violation.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Minister of Interior

Ali Yerlikaya

T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı, Bakanlıklar

Ankara

Türkiye

Email: ozelkalem@icisleri.gov.tr

Dear Minister,

I welcome your recent comments regarding the violation of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly of the **Saturday Mothers/People**. Following your statement, on 11 November, 10 representatives of the group were able to read a brief statement in front of the Galatasaray High School and throw carnations over police barriers onto Galatasaray Square.

After five years of being unlawfully deprived of the exercise of their right to freedom of peaceful assembly in Galatasaray Square, this is a positive development towards ending this injustice. However, it still falls short of conclusions of the Maside Ocak (No. 2019/21721) and Gülseren Yoleri (No. 2020/7092) Constitutional Court rulings, which clearly stated that the applicants' rights to freedom of peaceful assembly had been violated and that the district governorate must be informed of the rulings so as to prevent future violations. In other words, the Constitutional Court ruled that the group should be allowed to hold their peaceful vigil in Galatasaray Square but despite these clear and binding court decisions, the square remains under police blockade and Saturday Mothers/People face restrictions on the number of their members being present for the vigil. This is also in contravention of Articles 10 and 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Articles 19 and 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which Türkiye is a party to.

I therefore urge you to use your authority to ensure the ongoing police blockade on Galatasaray Square is lifted without any further delay and Saturday Mothers/People and all others who wish to gather peacefully on the square are allowed to do so every week.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For the past 28 years, the Saturday Mothers/People have tirelessly sought truth and justice for their loved ones who were forcibly disappeared in police custody in the 1980s and 1990s. Saturday Mothers/People began holding a peaceful weekly vigil in Galatasaray Square in central Istanbul since May 1995 demanding that the authorities account for the fate of their loved ones. Despite being detained every week, they continued to gather in the square until March 1999 when they faced heavy-handed police repression with the aim of stopping the peaceful protests from taking place. After a gap of ten years and because there was no progress in their quest for truth and justice for their disappeared relatives, the group returned to Galatasaray Square in January 2009.

Time and again, the Saturday Mothers/People have been met with brutal crackdowns and even prosecutions for taking part in peaceful vigils. Turkish authorities have never provided a valid justification for their unlawful denial of the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

In August 2018, riot police used tear gas and water cannons as well as excessive force to disperse the hundreds of people who had peacefully gathered to mark the 700th weekly vigil. The justification for the intervention was a banning order by the Beyoğlu district governor on the grounds that the Square was not a designated location for assemblies and that they had not been notified of the assembly. 47 people were detained using excessive force. 46 of those were indicted in 2021 and are still facing the charges of 'refusing to disperse despite warnings'. Their prosecution continues.

Following two positive Constitutional Court rulings in November 2022 and March 2023, concluding that the rights to freedom of assembly of the applicants had been violated and that the authorities should ensure non repetition of the violation, the groups has been peacefully attempting to hold their vigil since early April 2023, despite weekly detentions, police excessive use of force, at times amounting to torture or other ill-treatment. In August 2023, a new prosecution was initiated against 20 relatives and other human rights defenders who were detained on 10 June 2023 for 'refusing to disperse despite warnings'. Their first hearing will be held in February 2024.

On 8 November 2023, in response to a question by an opposition MP in Parliament, the Minister of Interior Ali Yerlikaya said: 'What the Saturday Mothers are experiencing is victimisation. We will find a solution as soon as possible. As you saw we didn't detain them this week.' Subsequently, a limited vigil was allowed to take place with 10 relatives of the disappeared nearby Galatasaray Square.

Since August 2018, armed riot police have been continuously stationed in Galatasaray Square, blockading all access.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Turkish; English.

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 12 January 2024

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PRONOUN: Saturday Mothers/People (ALL)

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR44/7357/2023/en/>