

Bruised and battered

Torture returns to Turkey

The crackdown gets brutal



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THE masked special-ops officers barged into their apartment in Diyarbakir, in Turkey's south-east, in the dead of a December night, says Tulay Yer-Celik. For the next two hours Mrs Yer-Celik, her month-old son and her mother-in-law listened as the agents beat her husband, Omer, in the next room. The violence ended only when the police arrived. Mr Celik, a journalist for the pro-Kurdish Dicle Haber Agency, one of over 150 news outlets shut down since last year's bloody, abortive coup, was detained in Diyarbakir for two weeks. He was then transferred to a

maximum-security prison near Istanbul, where he remains. His crime, according to an indictment that appeared only in late June, was to have published news stories based on the hacked e-mails of Turkey's energy minister. He faces a sentence of 16 years.

Turkey's government, led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, proclaimed a policy of "zero tolerance" for torture in the early 2000s. But amid the fallout from last year's coup and a continuing crackdown against Kurdish militants, tolerance is back. Human-rights groups have cited instances of beatings and torture, including rape and threats of rape, in Turkish detention centres. A UN official who visited Turkey late last year called such abuse "widespread".

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Human Rights Watch, a pressure group, has urged the government to investigate the kidnappings of four people accused of links to the Gulen movement, an Islamist sect believed to have inspired the coup. (The men are among the 110,000 civil servants purged from their jobs since last summer.) One of the four resurfaced in police custody after six weeks. He has

since accused security personnel of torturing him. Turkish officials rebuff questions about such cases. "There is no torture in detention centres," says one.

Similar outrages have come to light in the country's south-east, where at least 3,000 people have died in clashes between the army and Kurdish militants, and in a string of terrorist attacks, in the past two years. On August 5th security forces responded to the killing of a policeman near Sapatan, a Kurdish village, by forcing dozens of residents out of their homes and beating them in the local square. Of the 36 people detained, many were assaulted with hoses and metal rods at the local police station, according to Kurdish politicians who visited the area days later.

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rare. Officials involved in counter-terrorism operations were granted immunity from prosecution last year. Berat Albayrak, the energy minister and the president's son-in-law, remarked last week that he was tempted to strangle Gulenists whenever he saw them. Only a few years ago, the ruling Justice and Development party could plausibly claim to have done away with torture, notes Andrew Gardner of Amnesty International. "Since 2015 this success has been turned on its head," he says.

The international response to all this has been feeble. Nine months ago, following a fact-finding mission, the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture gave Mr Erdogan's government a detailed report on ill-treatment in Turkish prisons. Turkey has not allowed its findings to be made public. EU politicians, including Angela Merkel, have talked about cancelling accession talks with Turkey, but it has not happened.

Increasingly, the people who are trying to expose the abuses have themselves come under threat. Eight human-rights activists, including Amnesty International's Turkey director and two European nationals, have been behind bars since July on outlandish conspiracy charges. Journalists face similar pressure. When photos of some of the Sapatan villagers appeared on social media, their backs covered with bruises, the local governor's office insisted that the men had not been tortured. Reports to the contrary, it added, bore the mark of "terrorist propaganda".

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