

► *The Kurdish Question*

Moment of Truth

A wide-ranging peace process is unfolding in Turkey, which could lead to the resolution of the long-standing Kurdish question.

Turkey's 25 million Kurds have been engaged in a long struggle for basic cultural and political rights and have had to endure serious repression over a protracted period of time.

The developing peace process has so far included the following;

- Initial talks between the Turkish State and Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan.
- Agreement on a ceasefire in the almost three decade conflict that has cost over 40 000 lives.
- The endorsement of the process by influential civil society leaders on both sides.
- The withdrawal of PKK armed forces from the Turkish border area to their base at the Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq
- The hosting of various civil society conference to discuss the basis for peace
- The planning of a conference of a wide range of Kurdish organisations to be held in

Europe in June

- A visit to South Africa by a multi-party delegation from Turkey to examine the peace process here.
- Hundreds of local meetings in various parts of Turkey to brief people about the unfolding process.

Following the start of the withdrawal of guerrilla fighters, PKK Commander Murat Karayilan, speaking through a spokesperson, said:

"There are 25 million Kurds in Turkey and they have to be given their natural rights," "We need a new constitution that will ensure our freedom, officially recognize Kurdish identity and language, and a decentralized government."

The peace process would have to include the release of Ocalan and thousands of political prisoners, the suspension of repressive legislation and the setting up of an inclusive, negotiating forum.

This will then logically have to lead to the formulation of a new constitution that secures basic freedoms for everyone and that recognises Kurdish identity.

Editorial

Peace is a real possibility

SINCE the inception of KHRAG in 1997, we have advocated consistently that the conflict between the Kurdish people and the Turkish state, which has claimed more than 40 000 lives, be resolved through peaceful negotiations.

All indications are that a historic process is underway in Turkey to find a lasting solution to the Kurdish question.

Turkey has held initial talks with Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan at his Island prison and various groups and prominent individuals on both sides have come out in support of a political solution. These are encouraging signs.

This newsletter examines different aspects of the emerging peace process.

The Kurds have been without a place to call home since their territory was carved up by European powers close to a century ago. Initially their demands included the re-establishment of Kurdistan but in recent years they have spoken more of regional autonomy within a constitutional democracy.

Kurds have been denied basic cultural and political rights and have had to endure immense repression over decades. Turkey's constitution makes no provision for the recognition of Kurdish identity. There has been a long process of assimilating the Kurds which included, among other things, the suppression of their language.

KHRAG is elated that a peace process is unfolding, though we realise that many hurdles still lay ahead.

For genuine negotiations to take place a number of things have to happen. Firstly, the repression must stop. Secondly, the climate for bona fide negotiations must be created through releasing Abdullah Ocalan and other political prisoners, unbanning Kurdish organisations, allowing exiles to return, scrapping repressive legislation such as the anti-terror law and permitting free political activity.

We call on the Kurdish formations and the Turkish state to grasp this historic opportunity and take it to its logical conclusion.



Close to a million Kurds listened to a recorded message from imprisoned leader Abdullah Ocalan, at a gathering in the southeastern Turkish city of Diyarbakir, Turkey on March 21, 2013. He called for an immediate cease-fire and for thousands of his fighters to withdraw from Turkish territory, a major step toward ending the fighting for self-rule for Kurds in southeastern Turkey.

Peace Initiatives • Peace Initiatives • Peace Initiatives

Intellectuals host peace conference

A group of intellectuals, academics, writers and artists held a Conference for Democracy and Peace on 25 and 26 May in Ankara.

The group included Vedat Türkali, Murathan Mungan, Orhan Pamuk, Rakesh Dink, Ya ar Kemal, Tarık Ziya Ekinci, Prof. Yakın Ertürk, Prof. Ioanna Kuçuradi, Prof. Gençay Gürsoy, Prof. ebnem Korur Fincancı and Arif Sa.

Speaking on behalf of the organisers, ahead of the conference, HDK Executive Council Member Bircan Yorulmaz said: "Turkey is going through a historic process. Today is important for everyone to contribute to the building of a life inspired by freedom and equality principles and to democratic politics based on human rights".

Remarking that peace and democracy were an urgent need in Turkey, Yorulmaz said that the country's new constitution should guarantee all different cultures, identities, languages and beliefs in the society and that the judicial system should have human rights and democratic law principles as a reference. Yorulmaz said people needed to create a social pressure for the fulfilment of these demands and indicated the organization of a Conference for Democracy and Peace as an historic responsibility and need in the currently ongoing process.

Gençay Gürsoy said the conference was organized to give voice to the opinions of those siding with a pluralistic, inclusive, multicultural and multiethnic society.

Writer Murathan Mungan evaluated the currently ongoing process of talks as an opportunity Turkey should take, adding, "I am of the opinion that this process should be supported by everyone. Wars have become

like a Hollywood film to us by now. We are watching them almost without emotions".

From Fırat News. For full story go to <http://en.firatnews.com/news/news/intellectuals-organize-conference-for-peace.htm>

Big Kurdish gathering planned in Europe

Associations and organizations from Kurdistan and Turkey and representatives of political parties in Europe gathered in the Belgium capital Brussels to debate the conference which will take place in Europe. The conference is part of the series of meetings Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan proposed in the context of the ongoing process for peace and democratic politics.

The meeting in Brussels was attended by the representatives of more than 60 associations and organizations as well as KONGRA-GEL President Remzi Kartal, KCK (Kurdish Communities Union) Executive Council member Zübeyir Aydar who agreed on the organization of Democracy and Peace Conference in Brussels on 29-30 June.

A committee was formed at the meeting, consisting of 14 representatives of various associations and organizations. It will take care of the preparations for the conference and hold talks with all relevant circles in Europe and calling for their participation in the conference.

According to the decision made at the meeting, 250 people will attend the conference, to include the representatives of all beliefs, labour, women and youth organizations in Kurdistan and Turkey.

Making the opening speech at the meeting, KONGRA-GEL President Remzi Kartal

stated that Kurdish people's leader Öcalan initiated a new phase with the call he made on 21 March in Amed. Kartal said the ongoing historic process will pave the way for the replacement of the conflict environment with democratic politics as well as a radical change to arise in Turkey and to spread into the entire Middle East region.

<http://en.firatnews.com/news/news/europe-kurdish-conference-to-be-held-in-june.htm>

Plan to get five million signatures for Ocalan's release

A group of activists in the Kurdistan Region has collected 60,000 signatures calling for the release of jailed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan, a first step to a goal of five million names on the international petition by mid-August.

Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, together with 90 MPs and political leaders, is among the prominent names on the list, said Kawa Nadir Qadir, the head campaigner in Kurdistan.

"Every day we collect at least 10,000 signatures," said Qadir, confident he will meet the campaign's goal of one million names from the Kurdistan Region.

"The petition will later be given to the United Nations and other relevant institutions," he said, adding that anyone over 12 can sign. The campaign is taking place simultaneously in Iraqi Kurdistan, Syria's Kurdish areas, Turkey and some European countries and in South Africa.

<http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/200520131>



Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) fighters walk on the way to their new base in northern Iraq May 14, 2013. The withdrawal of guerilla fighters is part of an attempt to kickstart a peace process in Turkey. There are an estimated 2,000 armed PKK militants inside Turkey and up to 5,000 in northern Iraq's self-ruled Kurdish area.



The Turkish government have appointed a group of journalists, academics and artists to promote a peace process between Turkey and the Kurdish resistance movement. Here they gather at a meeting in Ankara early in May. Language rights, other cultural rights and the recognition of Kurdish identity are among the issues that will be key to the peace process.

Language rights are pivotal

THE question of Kurdish language rights will most certainly come up during peace talks in Turkey. This summary of an article by freelancer Sibel Utku Bila, provides some insight into the key elements.

Education in their mother tongue is a pivotal demand of Turkey's Kurds, and peace talks between Ankara and Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan have raised hopes that it will materialise after decades of repression.

The government has so far given the cold shoulder to the demand, even though it has introduced Kurdish as an elective course in schools and launched university programmes to train Kurdish language teachers. Many in Ankara worry that recognizing Kurdish as a language of education will broaden Turkey's ethnic rift and play into the hands of separatists.

In the southeast, however, the Kurdish political movement and civic society have already mounted an all-out drive to enroot their language, bent on developing alternative education means and reviving Kurdish culture. Volunteerism is vibrant, with Kurds from all walks of life doubling as activists, teachers, writers or publishers. The Kurdi-Der Association, whose branches have mushroomed across the region, is leading a well-organized campaign to teach Kurds their mother tongue, which they were banned even from speaking until the early 1990s.

In Diyarbakir, the regional centre, a civic foundation grouping prominent figures has launched a bid to establish Turkey's first Kurdish-language university. Braving frequent confrontations with the courts, local administrations held by the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) promote the concept of "multi-language services," and sponsor kindergartens and "education support houses," where pupils are taught in their mother tongue.

Speaking at the inauguration of Kurdish-language philosophy, mathematics and physics classes at an "education support house" on March 29, the mayor of Diyarbakir's Sur district, Abdullah Demirbas, conceded that the move transgressed the constitution, but stressed that Kurds were determined to use their rights regardless of what the law said. "At a time when the guns are to be silenced in favour of democratic politics, this method of ours should be seen as an effort to obtain our rights by ourselves.

Kasim Birtek, the head of the Egitim-Sen teachers union in Diyarbakir, says the language mobilization shows that the Kurds are not just passively demanding their rights, but are simultaneously "building their institutions" for the future. He believes that no peace initiative will be convincing unless the right to Kurdish-language education is recognized.

Like Birtek's own kids, many Kurdish

children have grown up speaking only Turkish and learned their mother tongue in later years. Many Kurds, among them popular figures, remain alien to their language, especially in urban areas.

Cultural life has also flourished in Diyarbakir, a far cry from the days when even listening to Kurdish music was a clandestine affair. The city theatre performs almost exclusively in Kurdish, boasting Hamlet in its repertoire. A municipality-funded conservatory offers Kurdish-language art classes to both children and adults. Youths meet in Kurdish-language cinema and philosophy clubs, and literary life is thriving.

Kurdish intellectuals, however, see a long way ahead to make up for the years of repression and note that many Kurds are succumbing to "auto-assimilation" in terms of language despite the newly found climate of cultural freedom. They worry that the current revival will eventually stagnate unless Kurdish becomes the language of education and academic study.

Lal Lales, a teacher who is also a published poet and heads a publishing house run by volunteers, says Turkey's Kurds are yet to produce a thorough dictionary for their main dialect, the Kurmanji, and agree on some outstanding differences concerning grammar and spelling rules.

The chairman of the Kurdish Writers Association, Sexmus Sefer, observes that Kurdish authors are slowly breaking the tradition of political writing, which has been an essential part in the struggle for Kurdish freedoms. "Since people are no longer afraid to be Kurds, they are getting bored with political themes," he said.

Lales and Sefer are both confident that Turkey's Kurds are the intellectual leaders of the Kurdish world and stand far ahead in espousing modern thought and openness to the West. "If the Kemalist ideology gave [Turkey's] Kurds anything good, it was modern scientific thinking," Lales said.

The largest of the four communities, Turkey's Kurds use a variant of the Latin alphabet, while the Iraqi Kurds, with whom they enjoy the closest ties at present, use the Arabic script. Moreover, the Iraqi Kurds speak not the Kurmanji but the Sorani dialect.

In intellectual brainstorming meetings on how to ease communication barriers, Turkey's Kurds have floated the idea of a gradual transition to the Latin script in autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan. The idea, however, has received little support. "They [Iraqi Kurds] believe that a shift to the Latin script will cut their links with the past. This may be a justified argument, but it's wrong in terms of integration with the world and Kurdish unity," Sefer said. Read more: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/kurdish-language-turkey-peace-process.html#ixzz2UPtLgz5>

Multi-party delegation from Turkey studies SA peace process

KHRAG members met informally with representatives of various political party representatives from Turkey when they visited South Africa last month to study our country's peace process from apartheid to democracy. Extracts from a Mesop article, below, provides some information on the visit.

Journalists, academics and deputies from the BDP, CHP and AKP visited South Africa to research the country's conflict resolution process and transition to democracy. As part of the ongoing peace process between the Turkish government and Kurdish movement, policy makers and writers participated in a comparative study visit to learn about apartheid and South Africa's conflict

The cost of war

The Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK) launched its armed struggle for autonomy and greater rights for Kurds in 1984.

Almost 30 years later, the conflict has claimed more than 40,000 lives and has cost Turkey up to £290bn.

The PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, was captured in Kenya in 1999 and imprisoned for treason. He is still being held in solitary confinement on the prison island of Imrali, south of Istanbul.

According to the International Crisis Group, the past 18 months have been the most violent in more than a decade, leaving more than 900 dead.

Over the same period, the Turkish state imprisoned more than 8,000 Kurdish activists, politicians and journalists under arbitrary terrorism laws.

In the autumn of 2012, Kurdish prisoners started a hunger strike involving up to 600 inmates that lasted 68 days until Ocalan ordered an end to the protest.

Tentative and secret peace talks got under way late last year between Ocalan and Turkey's intelligence chief, leading to the announcement of a ceasefire in March and the start two months later of a PKK withdrawal from Turkey into mountain strongholds in northern Iraq.

resolution process.

Organised by the Democratic Progress Institute and hosted by the South African government in early May, participants included AKP deputies Nursuna Memecan, Mehmet Tekelio lu and Burhan Kayatürk, CHP deputies Sezgin Tanrikulu and Levent Gök, and BDP deputies Nazmi Gür, Ayla Akat and Ertu rul Kürkçü. Journalists, academics and some members of the Wise People Commission also attended, including Cengiz Çandar, Bejan Matur, Ahmet nsel, Havva Kök, Mehmet Asutay, Hatem Ete, Yılmaz Ensaro lu, Mithat Sancar and Ali Bayramo lu.

The participants met with key individuals involved in South Africa's transition to democracy, including Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe, former South Africa Minister of Defence and chief negotiator for the South African government, Roelf Meyer, and numerous other high-level players within South Africa's government, political parties and democratic institutions, who shared their direct and personal experiences of democratic change within South Africa.

Speaking to SES Türkiye, members of the delegation said that while the experience of South Africa is different from Turkey, the

country's reconciliation process and transition to democracy nonetheless provides some insight into a successful peace process.

For CHP deputy Levent Gok, the situation in South Africa and Turkey are different because in South Africa there was an extreme form of state implemented segregation while in Turkey there is no desire to segregate people as Turks and Kurds are co-founders of the state.

Arguing that in a peace and new constitution drafting process "representative" democracy is important, Gok said a solution should be found peacefully within parliament. Nazmi Gur, a BDP deputy from Van, said that while many things in South Africa are different than Turkey, two points are applicable. "The first is the role of Mandela in the solution process and the second is a new constitution. During the solution process the truth and reconciliation commission played a large role. The commission almost carried out one-on-one work, bringing those that had been abused with those who committed torture. As part of a solution to the Kurdish issue in Turkey, a truth and reconciliation commission should be established," Gur said.

To read more go to <http://www.mesop.de/?p=32433>



Selhaddin Demirtas, co-chairman of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), stands in front of a large poster of jailed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan during a rally in Istanbul in March 2013.



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Working for Kurdish human rights

CLOSE to 500 people attended a KHRAG fundraiser at the Baxter theatre in March hosted by top comedian Riaad Moosa.

This was the biggest in a string of successful fundraising events KHRAG has organised in the last two years.

Speaking briefly at the start of the evening, KHRAG chairperson Judge Essa Moosa, thanked the comedian for supporting KHRAG's efforts to secure a negotiated peace of the Kurdish question in Turkey.

He called for the release of Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan, as a key element of the peace process. Ocalan has been imprisoned on an Island in Turkey since 1999.

Meanwhile our **communication** efforts continue, with this latest electronic newsletter being part of our programme. KHRAG

distributes this newsletter to thousands in South Africa and around the globe. More information on KHRAG and the Kurdish question in general can be found on our website (on previous page).

On an **international** front, KHRAG's chair Judge Moosa and deputy Fr Matt Esau, have met with members of various Turkey political parties that visited South Africa. Judge Moosa has attended conferences and meetings in Europe and Turkey, related to the peace process.

The KHRAG office is still next to St George's cathedral (see details below) and is staffed by Razia Bharoochi. Information on the Kurdish struggle and the work of KHRAG can be supplied by the organisation. Anyone wishing to support KHRAG's work, can contact us through our office or by emailing us at the address on previous page.

KHRAG has called for the release of Adem Uzen and the dropping of charges against Dr Yilmaz Orkan, both prominent Kurdish leaders.

Mr Uzen, has been detained in France for several months now. He was instrumental in supporting and encouraging the peace initiative and participated in the Oslo peace process in 2010 to 2011.

Dr Orkan was arrested in Brussels while on the way to a conference in North Africa and extradited to Spain. He was released on bail but cannot leave Spain. He visited South Africa in December 2010 and was the guest of the ANC conference in Bloemfontein.

KHRAG calls for the dropping of charges against Dr Orkan and the immediate release of Mr Uzen so that they can participate in the peace process.

Young Kurdish women during the celebrations of the Kurdish new year, Newroz, in March this year.

