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OFFICE

PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC PARTY (HDP) IN TURKEY.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON EUROPE, EURASIA, AND
EMERGING THREATS

HEARING: "TURKEY'S DEMOCRACY UNDER
CHALLENGE"

APRIL 5, 2017

Dear Honorable Chairman Dana Rohrabacher and distinguished members of the House Subcommittee,

It is an honor for me to testify today on a crucial development in Turkey. I would like to discuss a few major threats to democracy and rule of law in Turkey.

The constitutional amendments that are proposed by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the ruling AK Party projects an authoritarian system of governance, whereby absolute power is held by a single person.

Even though the proposed constitutional amendments have not been legally accepted, the amendments have been implemented and practiced under the State of Emergency Rule.

Let me enlist several indications of this extralegal, single-person rule:

Since the failed coup attempt in July 2016, the immunity of 55 out of 59 HDP law makers has been removed. Following this, 11 HDP deputies have been arrested, including the Co-Chair Selahattin Demirtas and Co-Chair Figen Yüksekdağ. The freedom of speech that democracy supports and Turkey's Constitution guarantees is the basic allegation against Co-Chair Demirtas for what he is subjected to over 500 years of detention.

Between July 22, 2015, and March, 27 2017, 8,930 HDP members were detained; and

2782 party members have been imprisoned. 494 HDP offices have been attacked; burned or vandalized, including the party headquarters. HDP rallies were attacked and law enforcement's support for these attacks have been widely documented, even on social media.

At the 84 municipalities run by the pro-Kurdish Democratic Regions Party (DBP), 88 co-mayors and 6 deputy co-mayors were dismissed and replaced by state appointed trustees. The mayors and co-mayors are currently under arrest. These mayors and co-mayors were all democratically elected by the people with overwhelming majority.

Around 10,000 municipality and humanitarian employees of Kurdish origin have been suspended from their positions. The government has also been confiscating the monetary assets of people they remove from their positions.

Almost all of the media outlets broadcasting in Kurdish at both local and national levels were closed. Kurdish journalists are arrested and sent to prisons. Even daycares where Kurdish is spoken have been shut down by the government.

Speaking of prisons, the torture and ill-treatment methods, namely beating and punching of detainees; sexual violence including rape and threat of rape; deprivation of basic needs, such as water, food and sleep; deprivation of medication and treatment; forcing detainees to kneel handcuffed from behind for hours; verbal abuse, psychological violence, and intimidation have been prevailing in Turkish prisons.

These methods of torture and ill-treatment recently led to a large-scale hunger strike among prisoners. The HDP Co-Chair Selahattin Demirtas has also joined the hunger strike to raise the awareness for torture.

The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in South-East Turkey is estimated between 355,000 to half a million people, mainly citizens of Kurdish origin. The humanitarian aid to the IDPs is very limited. All of the local humanitarian NGOs have been shut down. The government aid to IDPs is also conditioned upon leaving their properties and land, which would bring a demographical change in the Kurdish-populated areas. Many people have already left their homes.

Since the failed coup attempt in July 2015, the Turkish government forces have been conducting security operations in a number of South-Eastern provinces, involving thousands of troops serving with combat-ready infantry, artillery and armoured army divisions, as well as the Turkish Air Force. The authorities also imposed extended around-the-clock curfews on over 30 towns and neighborhoods prohibiting any movement without permission for extended period of time, lasting up to several months. These months-long around-the-clock curfews have prevented civilians to evacuate the towns where the Turkish military conducted operations. The lack of emergency services to the sick and wounded ultimately contributed

to the high death toll of operations. In total of 2,000 people were killed during those operations and curfews. The public prosecutors have consistently refused opening investigations on the reported killings. Failure to conduct investigations on the killings is a clear violation of constitutional and international human rights law obligations.

In the coldest months of the year, the late January and early February of 2016, for weeks, in the town of Cizre, 189 men, women and children were trapped in basements of the buildings that were heavily shelled by the Turkish security forces. These people did not have access to water, food and medical attention. Even though the trapped were calling for attention and help from the international community via phone conversations and videos, they were burned alive by the Turkish security forces.

The Kurdish provinces and cities that Turkish security forces targeted includes Sur, Silvan, and Lice in the province of Diyarbakir, Nusaybin, and Dargecit in the province of Mardin, Cizre, Silopi, Idil, Sirnak city center in the province of Sirnak, and Yuksekova in the province of Hakkari. These towns have been destroyed by the Turkish security forces.

The images of the destroyed Kurdish cities resemble the Syrian civil war images.

The scale of the unnecessary destructions, including damages to properties and businesses, in Kurdish cities and towns is estimated around 21 billion US dollars.

On March 10, 2017 the UN human rights office published a report detailing massive destruction, killings and numerous other serious human rights violations committed by Turkish forces between July 2015 and December 2016 in southeast Turkey¹.

According to Human Rights Association, the Turkish government has conditioned financial compensation for destroyed housing upon the signature of declaration by owners that their property was destroyed by “terrorist activities”. Families who have been forced to sign such declaration have reported this practice as an effort to falsify the historical

¹ <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=56330>

record of the 2015-16 events and an effort to bring impunity to the state officers committed to human rights violations. It has also been reported that a number of families, who had been compelled to abandon their destroyed homes during the period of the security operations, were also forced to sign away the ownership of their properties.

Honorable Chairman Dana Rohrabacher and the Distinguished members of the House Subcommittee,

My people in Turkey are going through a full-scaled assault, which could be viewed as a form of genocide. The Turkish authorities have seen the Kurdish identity as the main enemy. Fighting this enemy, they have been conducting a slow-motion genocide. In fact, when we look at the eight stages of genocide published by Genocide Watch, we see that the Turkish government is indeed committing genocide against a minority.

On November 18 2016, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, expressed grave concerns about the “draconian” measures being used to erode independent opinion and expression in Turkey.

I urge the United States House of Representatives to address these concerns; to launch investigations on the crimes against humanity committed in South-East Turkey. I urge the United States House of Representatives to take action to put further pressure on the Turkish authorities to respect democracy, rule of law and human rights, and ensure the freedom of speech with releasing thousands of political prisoners and journalists. I also urge the House of Representatives to act upon mediating peace talks and negotiations in Turkey and achieve a peaceful and political solution in Turkey to the Kurdish issue with encouraging the Turkish authorities to resume the peace talks and mediate the peace process to achieve a political solution.

With the approaching referendum on the constitutional amendments, Turkish society has become further polarized, across different social, ethnic, and sectarian groups. What has been quite worrisome is the fact that the ruling AK Party has been arming its supporters and state authorities have been encouraging attacks on the dissident groups within

the country. If the situation in Turkey is not taken seriously and democracy and the rule of law in Turkey are not restored and rescued immediately, the country would face a large-scale civil war. Unfortunately, Turkey slowly but steadily is moving into chaos that leads to destabilizing the region further, in which we, the Kurds and other minorities would pay the heaviest price.