



December 7, 2022

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

On behalf of the American Public Health Association, a diverse community of public health professionals that champions the health of all people and communities, I write to express our concern regarding the arrest and detention of Dr. Şebnem Korur Fincancı, president of the Turkish Medical Association. We strongly urge the U.S. government to denounce this unfortunate action.

It is our understanding that Dr. Fincancı was detained on October 26 on charges of spreading terrorist propaganda. The arrest comes after Fincancı participated in a media broadcast linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party on the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Turkish army against the PKK in northern Iraq.

During the broadcast, she said that international law mandates an independent investigation into the events. It appears that Turkish authorities have interpreted the statement as siding with the PKK, which the Turkish state classifies as a terrorist organization. Dr. Fincancı was also dismissed from the post of president of the TMA and it was announced that new leadership would be appointed to the association.

Dr. Fincancı is a forensic expert with decades of experience in anti-torture work. Among other things, she has investigated prison deaths in Israel and the Philippines. Despite enormous pressure from authorities, for many years she truthfully reported findings of torture or deaths of detainees in Turkey, which had been suppressed. She has been persecuted for her activism on multiple occasions and was previously arrested in 2016 for supporting a freedom of the press campaign. For her consistently honest and thorough reporting based on review of medical records, the government labeled her a supporter of terrorism and an enemy of the state.

The TMA boasts a long progressive tradition and represents over 100,000 medical doctors. It is the sister organization of the European Trade Union Confederation affiliate, KESK, which has also called for her immediate release. In the days preceding the arrest, both the TMA and Dr. Fincancı were attacked in the media, including by President Erdoğan. Erdoğan has stated the government was determined to accelerate the introduction of new structures in professional organizations, particularly the TMA. The offensive against the TMA included calls for the organization to be shut down and Dr. Fincancı to be stripped of her passport. This was a measure taken against many activists and academics in Turkey who had signed the Peace Petition in 2016.

The Peace Petition was published to warn against violence perpetrated by the Turkish state in Kurdish regions. It was signed by more than 2,000 individuals, including many members of the TMA. Many of the signatories faced prison sentences, while others were forced to emigrate. Those who stayed continued to face pressure, as was the case with some members of the TMA.

Dr. Fincancı has received numerous awards for her human rights work, including the Hessian Peace Prize by the Peace Research Institute of Frankfurt and the Physicians for Human Rights Human Rights Award. As a well-known and respected medical practitioner, her activism, role and willingness to speak out in exposing these alleged health and human rights violations, must be protected. We again ask you to denounce her detainment and treatment and to urge her release.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Georges C. Benjamin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Georges" being the most prominent.

Georges C. Benjamin, MD
Executive Director

Cc: The Honorable Jeffry L. Flake