

Statement by Peace in Kurdistan Campaign, Roj Women, MAF-DAD & Campaign Against Criminalising Communities (CAMPACC)

Outrage as Kurds held up for hours at Dover crossing

Kurdish families bound for Paris protest on anniversary of killings were stopped and searched under Schedule 7 of Terrorism Act 2000

We were deeply shocked to learn that Kurdish families, including mothers with children and elderly people, travelling by coach from London to Paris, were stopped at Dover by police and held for over seven hours without any evidence of wrongdoing or illegal activities on their part. The Kurds were journeying in one of three coaches having departed from Haringey on Friday evening 10th January to attend a demonstration in Paris on the following Saturday afternoon to mark the anniversary of the murders of three Kurdish women – Sakine Cansiz, Fidan Dogan and Leyla Saylemez – in the French capital a year earlier. The Kurds believe that these three women were victims of state terrorism and that the real culprits are being sheltered by the authorities in Turkey.

We have seen profoundly disturbing reports of how the families were mistreated at Dover. We are outraged by the total insensitivity displayed by police officers, especially in forcing people to wait outside in the freezing cold during the middle of the night while individuals were lined up to be questioned. The intrusive, provocative manner of searching women, and the leading questions that were asked, are further causes for concern. It seems that interrogators were attempting to coerce or trick individuals into making admissions that they were acting on behalf of the PKK and hence engaging in terrorism-related activity, when in fact they were simply travelling to participate in a legitimate public activity that had been widely advertised.

The Europe-wide demonstration called by Kurdish communities was easy to anticipate, given the circumstances of the killings and the fact that it was the first anniversary. Furthermore money, mobile phones and other items were confiscated from individuals on the putative basis that they were acting on behalf of “an illegal organisation”. Again, no evidence was presented. That such disproportionate measures can be taken against innocent members of any community on “suspicion”, without the obligation to show any evidence whatsoever, surely exposes the dangerously oppressive character of Britain’s current anti-terrorism legislation.

The criminalisation of communities such as the Kurds, who themselves are the victims of terrorism and of historic injustices, is deeply offensive as well in itself being counterproductive. Such actions can only alienate people from the authorities and lead to more disharmony in society. And it is certainly well below the standards of decency that members of any civilised democratic society should expect.

The killings that occurred in the heart of Paris on 9 January 2013 were a terrible crime that shocked and outraged Kurdish people everywhere. The three Kurdish women were high-profile activists in the national movement. The circumstances of their brutal murder, with the bullets from a single gun fired at point-blank range, immediately alerted suspicions that these were no ordinary killings. Respected by Kurds all over Europe and in Kurdistan for their dedication to their people’s cause, the victims instantly became heroines – three more martyrs added to the long list of those who have lost their lives in the fight for the right to live as a free people. It was perfectly legitimate and understandable that Kurds wanted to

commemorate the deaths of these three courageous women. Their plans to travel to Paris would have been widely known and must have been anticipated. The treatment that they endured at the border under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act therefore amounts to political harassment on a very sad anniversary.

Sakine, Fidan and Leyla represented three generations of Kurdish women united in a common cause. They were well-known public figures, both in France and around Europe. Their killing bore all the hallmarks of a meticulously planned targeted assassination involving well-organised operatives. Their deaths immediately aroused the Kurds' suspicions that "dark forces" were seeking to undermine an emerging peace process between Abdullah Ocalan and Turkey. This was because the incident occurred just as news of talks was starting to break. Kurds treated with utter contempt the idea that the killings could have been anything other than politically motivated. After a year of investigations into the case, many questions remain and the Kurds' suspicions have still to be allayed. The Kurds are still seeking answers from the French authorities.

It was for these reasons, and principally to honour the memory of the three slain women, that Kurds decided to hold a major demonstration on the anniversary of the killing. The Kurds who travelled from London to express their continued frustration and anger at the lack of progress in the investigations, and to demand answers, should have been treated with respect by the authorities. That women and children were roughly handled, and addressed as if they were criminals, should concern all those who believe decent standards of behaviour and the rule of law. There should have been much more understanding and sympathy from the customs and security authorities in this case, given the situation and occasion. It is shameful and outrageous that Kurds travelling to Paris to express their anger at an injustice perpetrated against members of their community were themselves subject to yet another injustice by UK authorities.

6 February 2014

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