One Hundred and Fifteenth Congress
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
December 5, 2017

President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

We write to express our deep concern regarding Turkey’s ongoing politically motivated persecution of human rights defenders.

Last June 6th, Turkish authorities detained Mr. Taner Kılıç, the Chair of Amnesty International Turkey, and remanded him to pre-trial detention. On July 5th, Turkish police detained Amnesty International’s Turkey Director Ms. İdil Eser, along with nine other human rights defenders, while they were participating in a routine human rights workshop. This is the first time that a Chair and Director of a national Amnesty International branch have been arrested in the history the organization.

Those arrested on July 5th are collectively known as the Istanbul 10 and include some of Turkey’s leading human rights figures: Günel Kurşun (lawyer, Human Rights Agenda Association), İlknur Üstün (Women’s Coalition), Nalan Erkem (lawyer, Citizens Assembly), Nejat Taştan (Equal Rights Watch Association), Özlem Dalkıran (Citizens’ Assembly), Şeyhmuz Özbekli (lawyer), and Veli Acu (Human Rights Agenda Association). In addition, two foreign trainers were also arrested, Peter Steudtner, a German national, and Ali Gharavi, a Swedish national. Eight of the ten were remanded to pre-trial detention. All those arrested are indicted on the charge of “membership of a terrorist organization.” If convicted, they face sentences of up to 15 years imprisonment.

On October 25th, after more than 100 days of pre-trial detention, a court ordered the jailed Istanbul 10 rights defenders to be released on bail. But the next day, Taner Kılıç’s pre-trial detention was extended in a separate hearing.

The charges against the two senior Amnesty International officials and other human rights defenders are baseless. They were arrested merely for doing their work protecting the rights of others who are imprisoned and tortured. Their arrests represent a dangerous escalation in the ongoing attacks on fundamental human rights and civil society in Turkey following a failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016.
To date, at least 50,000 people have been imprisoned pending trial and more than 100,000 public sector employees have been summarily dismissed since the coup attempt. The authorities have targeted critical voices in the media and civil society: at least 130 journalists and media workers have been detained, and more than a hundred media outlets have been closed. Hundreds of NGOs have been shut down.

If these prosecutions are allowed to move forward without a clear response from the United States government, a precedent will be set that will not only threaten the legitimate work of Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, but will also embolden authoritarian regimes around the world. The Turkish government must understand that business as usual cannot continue under these conditions. The costs for human rights in Turkey – and for human rights around the world – will be immensely and unacceptably high.

Together, we urge you to publicly call on the Government of Turkey to halt the prosecution of these human rights defenders, drop all charges against them, and immediately and unconditionally release those still in detention, including Mr. Kılıç.

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress  
Co-Chair, TLHRC

Randy Hultgren  
Member of Congress  
Co-Chair, TLHRC

Ro Khanna  
Member of Congress

Ted Poe  
Member of Congress

Barbara Lee  
Member of Congress

Trent Franks  
Member of Congress

Jamie Raskin  
Member of Congress

Gus M. Bilirakis  
Member of Congress
Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress

John P. Sarbanes
Member of Congress

Anna G. Eshoo
Member of Congress

Sheila Jackson Lee
Member of Congress

Eliot L. Engel
Member of Congress

Alan Lowenthal
Member of Congress

Jared Polis
Member of Congress

Peter King
Member of Congress

Lynn Jenkins
Member of Congress

Betty McCollum
Member of Congress

Jackie Speier
Member of Congress

Carol Shea-Porter
Member of Congress

Stephen F. Lynch
Member of Congress

Adam B. Schiff
Member of Congress

Marcy Kaptur
Member of Congress
David Scott  
Member of Congress

Zoe Lofgren  
Member of Congress

Chellie Pingree  
Member of Congress

Alcee L. Hastings  
Member of Congress

Grace Meng  
Member of Congress

Carolyn B. Maloney  
Member of Congress

John Conyers, Jr.  
Member of Congress

Joseph Crowley  
Member of Congress

Peter Welch  
Member of Congress

Mark Pocan  
Member of Congress

Jim Costa  
Member of Congress

Keith Ellison  
Member of Congress

Raul Grijalva  
Member of Congress

Lloyd Doggett  
Member of Congress

Norma J. Torres  
Member of Congress

Louise Slaughter  
Member of Congress
Daniel W. Lipinski
Member of Congress

Frank Pallone, Jr.
Member of Congress

David N. Cicilline
Member of Congress

Cc: Secretary of State Rex Tillerson