

Turkey Protest Movement: Erdogan Government Threatens Doctors and First Responders, Violates Medical Neutrality

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The Turkish Health Ministry issued a threat to take medical licenses to practice away from doctors who have been providing treatment to the protesters in Istanbul. They are also demanding the names of all medical volunteers including Emergency Medicine Technicians. This threat constitutes a violation of the human right of the protesters to receive treatment and the principle of medical neutrality.

Since May 27, peaceful protesters have been occupying Gezi Park in Istanbul, Turkey. The park is the last green space within the city and it was set to be demolished to build another of many shopping centers. What started with a few protesters trying to save the park has escalated to a national uprising over many grievances and the formation of coalition groups, including 180 organizations that formed Taksim Solidarity, to represent the people in negotiations with the government.



However, the response by Prime Minister Erdogan has been severe and violent. He threatens the protesters daily. Riot police have repeatedly stormed the park and attacked protesters. They've used water cannons, pepper spray and shot tear gas canisters into crowds. The protesters have stayed strong against these assaults, doing what they can to protect themselves with helmets and gas masks made from plastic bottles, but so far more than 5,000 protesters have been injured, some critically, and 4 protesters are dead.

Medic tents were set up in Gezi Park, but these were not sufficient to handle the severely wounded protesters. Makeshift hospitals have been set up in hotel lobbies and during some of the most chaotic moments, protesters formed human chains to keep the streets open so that ambulances carrying the wounded could pass through.

Prime Minister Erdogan continues to escalate his threats against the peaceful protesters. On Tuesday, lawyers went to Istanbul's Caklayan Court to issue a statement denouncing the repression of protesters in Gezi Park. The police attacked the lawyers before they could fully assemble and scores of them were arrested. In response, thousands of lawyers took to the streets in solidarity.

On Thursday, PM Erdogan called on parents with 'children' at the park to take their sons and daughters home. Instead, mothers of the protesters went to the park and formed a human barricade to protect them from the police.

Witnessing the extreme violence against the protesters and the severity of their injuries, physicians and other health professionals started volunteering at the Park to administer treatment. But now they are the target of repression. The Health Ministry is demanding the names of all who delivered care to protesters. The physicians are faced with a dilemma: lose their medical licenses or honor their oath to treat all who are in need. The response by the physicians is to refuse to cooperate. They held a banner stating "You will receive not one patient, not one medical colleague."

Health professionals have the right by international law to treat those in need. According to Physicians for Human Rights, which documents abuses around the globe, the principle of medical neutrality states that:

"Doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals are trained to treat those in need – regardless of politics, race, or religion. Attacks on health professionals violate the principle of medical neutrality and are grave breaches of international law."

Threats by the Health Ministry that will effectively force doctors and other caretakers to stop treating patients are a violation of this principle. Prime Minister Erdogan must stop the attacks on protesters and honor the duty that physicians and other health professionals have to care for those in need. The government has the responsibility to protect its citizens and respect their right to protest peacefully. Doctors who answer the call to provide services to those who are wounded, for whatever reason, should be encouraged and supported, not threatened. The Health Ministry must remove its threat.

Take action: Call the Turkish Embassy and demand that the Turkish Government remove its threat to health professionals and stop interfering in the care of wounded protesters. The phone number for the Turkish Embassy in Washington, DC is 202-612-6700/6701. And the phone number for the Turkish Consulate in New York City is 646-430-6560/6590.

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