

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 13, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to deeply impact countries around the world, presenting many governments with difficult choices that involve prioritizing public health to slow the spread of the disease. As we have seen in the United States, incarcerated populations are particularly vulnerable due to overcrowding and an inability to maintain proper distancing. We understand Turkey has recently been grappling with this issue as well. We urge you to engage directly with the Turkish government on its COVID-19 prison policy to insist that release policies are offered equitably and consistently, and that certain groups in detention – particularly journalists, activists, and other political prisoners – are not excluded for political purposes.

The Johns Hopkins University COVID-19 Dashboard lists Turkey as having the ninth highest number of COVID-19 infections worldwide, with 141,475 confirmed cases. With cases in the U.S. now topping one million, we know how difficult such a high number of infections is to manage, particularly among those in close confinement in prisons and jails. This is why governors across the U.S. have undertaken compassionate release policies aimed at reducing the population that could be exposed to COVID-19 while incarcerated by releasing individuals close to their release date or being held for non-violent crimes.

On April 14, 2020, the Turkish Parliament passed a new law that allowed for the release of tens of thousands of prisoners in order to help stop the spread of COVID-19. While this law was a commendable step forward for public health, it explicitly barred the release of those detained on terrorism charges or charges of violating Turkey's intelligence law as well as those in pre-trial detention, and as we know from news media reports and human rights groups, many of those arrested on such charges include journalists, students, civil society leaders, human rights advocates, and political opposition leaders who do not appear to either have demonstrable links to acts of terror or treason, or close and continuing associations with those engaged in such acts. In fact, as we are sure you are aware, there is ample evidence to indicate President Erdogan and the Turkish government have consistently applied Turkish criminal law very broadly – and in many cases inappropriately – to crack

down on these types of voices. The Department's 2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices stated, 'Under broad antiterror legislation the [Turkish] government restricted fundamental freedoms and compromised the rule of law.' The reports also specified that Turkish authorities had engaged in the 'arbitrary arrest and detention of tens of thousands of persons.'"

At a minimum, these prisoners should receive the same treatment as others who have been released to house arrest to help fight the COVID-19 pandemic. Turkey's crackdowns on journalists and political opposition are fundamentally problematic. To then hold these detainees while other prisoners are released during the pandemic calls into question the true motivation behind these charges.

As a critical NATO ally, it is incumbent upon the U.S. to engage with the Turkish government to press them on these issues and urge an equitable application of release policies. For that reason, we ask that you raise this directly with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, particularly in the context of any discussions of U.S. financial or other material assistance to Turkey to help mitigate the impacts of the pandemic.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,



David Trone
Member of Congress

/s/

William R. Keating
Member of Congress

/s/

Jim Costa
Member of Congress

/s/

Ilhan Omar
Member of Congress

/s/

Ami Bera, M.D.
Member of Congress

/s/

Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress