Turkey: Charges against 19 LGBTI+ rights defenders must be dropped

[Press Release](), [Civil Rights and Freedom](), [Freedom of Assembly](), [Turkey]()

Civil Rights Defenders, International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Front Line Defenders and International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA-Europe) call upon Turkish authorities to drop all charges against 19 LGBTI+ rights defenders due to stand trial on 12 November 2019 in Ankara

On 12 November 2019, 19 LGBTI+ rights defenders will stand trial, charged with "participating in an unlawful assembly" and "resisting despite warning" for   attending the peaceful LGBTI+ Pride March at the Middle East Technical University (METU) campus in Ankara on 10 May 2019.

The 19 (18 students and one faculty member), were among 22 people who were arrested during the Pride March in METU, after police forces entered the university campus at the request of the university administration. Police dispersed the crowd using pepper spray, tear gas and plastic bullets. All 22 arrested were released later that day.

Speaking on behalf of the four organisations, Björn van Roozendaal, Programmes Director for ILGA-Europe said, "The defenders were practising their right to assembly and standing up for the rights of others in a peaceful manner when the police attacked and arrested them. No one should be prosecuted for exercising their right to peaceful assembly. All charges against the human rights defenders should be dropped immediately, and this case should be closed."

The Pride March was organised by METU LGBTI+ Solidarity, a student group established in 1996, which works to secure gender equality, eradicate on-campus LGBTI+ phobia, and ensure that the university is a safe space for LGBTI+ people. The group has been organising Pride Marches on the campus every May since 2011.

On 6 May 2019, shortly before the METU Pride March, the university Rector, Mustafa Ver?an Kök, sent an email to all students, graduates, and faculty members, informing them that the Rectorate was prohibiting the event. He referred to the ban on LGBTI+ events in Ankara, issued by the Ankara Governor's office on 3 October 2018 and warned that the Rectorate would ask the Ankara Police to intervene if the event took place. When the Pride March commenced, the police violently dispersed students.

Twenty-one students and one professor were taken into police custody. Shortly afterwards, the university opened administrative investigations against the students who participated in the Pride March. On 5 August 2019, 19 of the 22 arrested LGBTI+ rights defenders were notified that a criminal case had been opened against them, related to the charges of "participating in an unlawful assembly" and "resisting despite warning" under Article 2911 of Turkish Penal Court.

In November 2017, using the state of emergency powers, a blanket indefinite ban on public events focused on LGBTI+ rights was issued in Ankara. Despite the ending of emergency rule in July 2018, the Ankara Governor's office did not lift the ban. On the contrary, on 3 October 2018, the Governor's office informed law enforcement and other relevant authorities of a new ban, without giving any indication of when it would end.

On 19 April 2019, the Ankara Administrative Appeals Court lifted the ban introduced under the state of emergency, on the grounds that it was unlawful and restricted rights and freedoms in unconditional, vague, and disproportionate ways.

The four organisations said "We would like to remind the authorities that the state's duty is to take security measures to protect peaceful assemblies and events, not ban them. The government should carry out a thorough and impartial investigation into the excessive use of force during the event, instead of prosecuting the human rights defenders. We reiterate our call to the authorities to drop all charges against the 19 defenders and ensure that all human rights defenders in Turkey are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions."