

# Africans For the Freedom of Abdullah Öcalan: 2003 Campaign

## Who is Abdullah Öcalan?

Many people ask why we should campaign for Öcalan's release from prison when there are people throughout the world that are currently being unjustly incarcerated. There are two main reasons.

Firstly, Apo (as Öcalan is fondly known) has been incarcerated in solitary confinement since 1999 in harsh conditions. İmralı Island, where he is imprisoned, is a restricted military zone located in the Sea of Marmara. He spent the first ten years of his sentence as the only prisoner on the island. In 2009, a new prison was built for him, and there are now three other prisoners on the island. All cells in this new prison are designed for solitary confinement. Each of the prisoners has his own tiny courtyard for fresh air, but due to the extreme height of the walls these yards look like well shafts. He cannot receive letters and in the last ten years, the authorities have only permitted five meetings with his lawyers and five family visits, and these were only made possible by the protracted hunger strikes of several thousand Kurdish political prisoners spread across Turkey.

Secondly, Apo is the leader of the Kurdish Freedom Movement, of which he was one of the founders. He was one of the founders of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and is widely recognised as the informal leader of the Kurdish Freedom Movement, a movement committed to women's liberation from patriarchy, harmony with nature, and human emancipation from the chains of a nation-state, all three of which are deeply interconnected.

The Kurds, together with Arabs, Persians, and Armenians, are the most ancient peoples of the Near East. Kurdish culture stems back to the migration of Indo-European ethnic groups some 4,000 years ago to the Qandil Mountains, now the heart of the 'Kurdish homeland', Kurdistan. They have their own language, Kurdish, one of the Indo-European family of languages related to Persian.

Perceived as posing a separatist threat to the four states that have colonized Kurdistan and without any formal representation on the world stage, they have been subject to genocide, crimes against humanity and other human rights abuses.

On 16 May 1916, the Sykes-Picot Agreement was signed between Britain and France for the partition of the Ottoman Empire. The agreement was an expression of colonial arbitrariness that laid the foundation for a reorganization of the region in accordance with the geo-political

interest of the European nations (as in Africa). Until this agreement, there were no nation-state borders that inhibited the movement of clans, families and tribes in the area.

The later Lausanne Treaty (1922) divided Kurdistan among four nation states, Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. The Kurdish regions in these states are known to the Kurds as Bakur, Rojava, Basur and Rojhilat respectively. The Kurds were not recognized as having any claim to the land and only very recently have they been recognized as a distinct national group, thus giving rise to the ongoing 'Kurdish question'.

Although no formal censuses exist, there are estimated to be 45 million Kurds; a large proportion are physically displaced (internal and external refugees), migrants, and asylum seekers across the world.

Colonial conditions, constant insecurity, and on-going wars have prevented Kurdistan from developing its agriculture, trade and industry. Kurdish society has not been able to modernize; semi-feudal tribal structures with systems of land ownership remain in the rural areas; and religious sects and associated sheikdoms have persisted.

## Political Asylum: Nelson Mandela

In 1992, after Nelson Mandela's release from the notorious Robben Island high-security prison for political offenders, and before he was inaugurated as the first president of a democratic South Africa, the Turkish government awarded him the Ataturk Peace Prize for his "lifelong fight for freedom". He refused this award saying that it was hypocritical of the Turkish regime to offer him this prize when it oppressed the Kurds just as Black Africans had been oppressed under the Apartheid regime.

Unsurprisingly, this caused outrage in Turkey and Mandela was called an "insolent African" for turning down this "prestigious" award.

Five years later at a Kurdish Festival in Germany (in September, 1997) Mandela said: "We know what it means to be oppressed in your own country. We know the pain of a mother whose child has disappeared ... We know what it means to have your nationality and culture insulted"

He added, "I am part of the Kurdish struggle. Just as Ocalan was labelled "a terrorist" in Turkey and many Western countries, he himself had been labelled a terrorist in these same Western countries. He condemned the war the Turkish regime was waging on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as "a war against human rights and against the masses".

Anticipating an attack on their base in their base in the Qandil mountains in 1979, Apo and other PKK leaders went into exile in Syria. They were initially were based in the Lebanese Bekaa valley (an area under the control of the Syrian Arab Republic) together with militants from other anti-colonial freedom movements, where they received training from the Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine, a member organisation of the PLO.

However, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 combined with the volatile politics of the Middle East in that region, resulted in the PKK office moving to Damascus. A decade later the PKK was forced to close its office because Turkey threatened to go to war against Syria unless it expelled the PKK. A messy period followed, during which Öcalan moved from one European state to another promoting a political solution to the 'Kurdish problem', as well as securing political asylum, but without success.

During this period, President Mandela offered him political asylum in South Africa. Through negotiations involving the South African foreign office, Ocalan was secretly flown by the Greek government to Kenya, where he was to obtain a South African passport. However, shady dealings (elaborated in *Ocalan's Prison Writings*) between the Turkish MIT [secret service], the CIA and Mossad [Israeli intelligence] resulted in Ocalan's capture and transfer to the high security Imrali prison island off Istanbul.

## International Campaign for the Freedom of Öcalan

The Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) based in Brussels will be holding a press conference in Strasbourg in front of the Council of Europe on 10<sup>th</sup> October at 1:30pm with deputies, representatives of trade unions and friends of the Kurdish people.

To coincide with the Strasbourg Conference, all European Union countries, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, Australia, India, Bangladesh, Colombia, Brasil, Argentina and Pakistan will be holding press conferences.

AFAO will be organising conferences in South Africa (Cape Town and Johannesburg)

Details of venues and speakers will be announced.

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