

## **The Human Rights Impact of Mass Displacement Caused by the Construction of the Ilisu Dam**

Speech by Anna Irvin, Development and Outreach Officer, Kurdish Human Rights Project

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Good afternoon. My name is Anna Irvin, and I am here on behalf of the Kurdish Human Rights Project, an international NGO which, along with several other NGOs and grass-roots campaigning groups, make up the Ilisu Dam Campaign.

I would like to begin by thanking the Foro Mundial for inviting me here to present to you all the background of the Ilisu dam and the impact that its construction would have. I come also with words of welcome and support from the other members of the Campaign, including ECA-Watch, Berne Declaration, Fern, Weed and Cornerhouse, and of course from the "Keep Hasankeyf Alive" initiative who are working hard on the ground in Turkey under the hardest of conditions to keep people informed and active in the defence of their rights.

For those of you who are not aware of the facts of the Ilisu dam, I will begin with a short summary. I would then like to move on to discuss the situation for the displaced people of the region and implications for the future.

### **1. BACKGROUND OF THE KHRP**

The Kurdish Human Rights Project was established in 1992 by a group of lawyers and human rights activists. It was created in response to the appalling human rights situation in the Kurdish regions and the international community's failure to effectively call Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and the former Soviet Union to account for the treatment of their Kurdish minorities. These states, encompassing the Kurdish regions, have ratified many international agreements relating to human rights, thereby freely volunteering their individual consent to be bound by them. KHRP was born as an independent non-political NGO out of a desire to utilise these international instruments in order to ensure that consistent violators of human rights within the Kurdish regions were made accountable before the legal structures which police both the European and wider international communities. These initial seeds have developed into an organisation that consistently draws international attention to, and encourages international condemnation of, human rights violations in the Kurdish regions.

Before focusing on the dam itself, I would like to give some context to the situation, for those of you not familiar with the region.

## **2. GENERAL BACKGROUND OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN TURKEY**

It is estimated that there are more than 15 million Kurds living in Turkey, predominantly in the south-east region, where the Ilisu dam is planned. This part of the country has a long and painful history of conflict from which it has yet to emerge.

Since 1984, an armed conflict between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish State has devastated the region where the Ilisu dam is to be built. The Kurdish Human Rights Project, along with most human rights organisations both within Turkey and internationally, estimates that the war has taken a toll of over three million people displaced, 30,000 people killed and more than 3,000 villages destroyed. Despite the ceasefire that began in 1999, many parts of the region remain in a state of emergency to this day. And human rights abuses remain all too common, as any glance at the European Court of Human Rights list of litigation against Turkey clearly reveals. The European Court has found Turkey to be in violation of its obligations under international law in 90 per cent of the cases where judgment has been handed down by the Court. Human rights abuses against Kurds are widespread throughout Turkey's south-east region and include extra-judicial killings, torture, rape and disappearances in addition to gross violations of freedom of expression, freedom of association and the right to a fair trial.

Beyond sustaining these human rights abuses and ravages of the war, the south-east suffers seriously from poverty and its related ills. Per capita income in the south-east is 42 per cent of the national average and barely a quarter of that in the cities of Western Turkey. Up to the present day, the south-east has also continued to be excepted from all previous land reforms in Turkey, leaving a situation where 8 per cent of farming families hold well over 50 per cent of the land and are notorious for absentee landlordism, while 41 per cent own less than 5 hectares and 38 per cent hold no land at all. Even if one takes no account of the effects of the 15-year war and the situation of human rights in the region, without comprehensive land reform it is inconceivable that the majority of the rural population could possibly benefit from the Ilisu dam or any other of the planned projects.

## **3. THE ILISU HYDROPOWER PROJECT**

The Ilisu dam, its reservoir and hydro-electric power plant would be built on the River Tigris in south-east Turkey, approximately 65km from the Syrian border and, if completed, would displace up to 78,000 women, children and

men, the majority of whom are Kurdish, destroying their homes, livelihoods, way of life and cultural roots. It would not only flood 68 villages but also deprive communities downstream in Syria and Iraq of water, cause environmental pollution and destroy the 10,000 year-old city of Hasankeyf, a site of enormous historical, cultural and archaeological importance.

If built, Ilisu would be the largest hydroelectric power project in Turkey, costing an estimated \$2 billion to construct, it is part of a network of 22 dams and 19 power plants in the giant Southeast Anatolia Project, known by its Turkish acronym GAP. It was to be built by an international consortium, led by a Swiss company, Sulzer Hydro. Companies in the consortium included Balfour Beatty of the UK, Impregilo of Italy and Skanska of Sweden. With the World Bank declining to become involved in GAP projects due to a number of ethical concerns, the financing was to be arranged by the Union Bank of Switzerland (UBS), with the export credit agencies of Austria, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the USA considering whether to provide support for the project. After one and a half years of very active campaigning, in 2002, the Ilisu dam campaign finally succeeded in getting the UK to pull out of the project, using many tactics such as the credible threat of legal action, press coverage, political work, grassroots letter writing, demonstrations, public meetings, coalition building, international networking and shareholder activism. Tactics which I am sure will be familiar to many of you here.

Despite the serious problems associated with the Ilisu dam project, and its failure to meet international standards in the areas of environmental protection, resettlement plans and cultural preservation, the Turkish government decided to go ahead with its plans. In 2004 the Austrian company VA Tech, now owned by the German company Siemens, was contracted to build the dam and other German, Austrian and French companies became involved. The Ilisu Dam Campaign continues, with local activists able to play a larger role, and as a result we are happy to say that since 2007, another firm has pulled out of the negotiations. However, Turkey appears to be behaving unilaterally, with scant regard for 153 conditions that it must fulfil before work on the dam can begin, and so the campaign continues. To summarise, the key concerns are:

- secrecy and the failure to release documents
- the failure to consider alternatives
- the dam's likely environmental impacts
- the dam's impact on the water rights of downstream countries
- the cultural impacts of the project
- the failure to consult with those affected by the project
- the confusion over the number of people to be resettled
- concerns over compensation
- the lack of a resettlement plan

- doubts about independent monitoring

But we are here this evening to talk in particular about the mass displacement of populations due to large dam construction, and so I would like to outline for you now some of the problems that thousands of people will face if Ilisu is built.

#### **4. IDPs**

The Turkish state has long planned to harness the Tigris and Euphrates, the two main water sources of the Middle East, both of which rise in the Kurdish regions of Turkey, with a series of massive dams. The General Directorate of State Hydraulic Works (DSI) was founded with that in mind in 1954. Despite making claims to provide sustainable living conditions for the people of the region by harvesting energy and creating more irrigated farmland, there is a more sinister undertone to the motivations behind the GAP project. By their own admission, they desire to “reinststate civilisation to the Upper Mesopotamia” a claim which emphasises the government’s refusal to recognise Kurdish heritage as valuable. A leaked memo in 1993 from the then president of Turkey, Turgut Ozal, makes the plan a little clearer: “with the evacuation of mountain settlements, the terrorist organisation [PKK] will have been isolated. Security forces should immediately move in and establish control in such areas. To prevent the locals’ return to the region, the building of a large number of dams in appropriate places is an alternative.”

The flooding of the land that Ilisu would cause can be seen as part of a wider aim of cultural assimilation aimed at erasing Kurdish culture by forcing villagers into the cities where their identity, community and language are submerged and forgotten. There is evidence of government oppression in the region being covered up, including potential graves of the disappeared. According to the World Archaeological Congress, this amounts to “a form of ethnic cleansing” in which supporting governments and companies will be complicit.

As I mentioned earlier, the decades of conflict in this area of Turkey have already led to millions of people being displaced. The campaign of village destruction in the 1980s and 1990s drove many to the cities such as Diyarbakir and Hakkari, which were ill-equipped to receive such numbers. Slums began to spread and the population exploded. To give an idea of the scale of growth, between 1991 and 1996, the city of Diyarbakir nearly quadrupled, from 380,000 to 1.3 million. The cities are swamped, the infrastructure, such as it was, has collapsed and the displaced families, already suffering from the deep trauma of forced evacuation, further face increased poverty, unemployment and intolerable pressure on already under-resourced public facilities. And yet it is to these cities that most of those displaced by the Ilisu dam would have to move.

In particular the situation of IDP women is of concern. Women undertake most of the unpaid work involved in holding a community together, such as bearing and raising children, caring for the sick and elderly, fetching water, growing and preparing food and caring for livestock. All of these are adversely affected by displacement, as the woman becomes isolated and is vulnerable to violence. The relative safety of the western cities to which many IDP women were displaced was not sufficient to overcome the difficulties facing them. Rather, migration to these cities represents another stage of displacement during which additional problems arise from the urban environment. In the urban context the situation of IDPs is complicated as a result of changes in family and community structures, domestic and state violence, and bias against women, which is compounded for IDP women as a result of their ethnicity and their educational and economic standing in Turkish society. IDPs suffer disproportionately high levels of psychological problems as a result of the reality and threat of violence, combined with the severe social dislocation associated with displacement. They are at an economic disadvantage and lack the social support networks necessary to survive in times of crisis. These problems create a complex situation in which many cumulative difficulties have an impact at an individual, family and community level. As one lawyer from the Human Rights Association in Batman said: "The pressures on all of us are unbearable... but our women and girls suffer in specific ways and we need to hear their voices and respond to their cries for help."

The poverty and despair that people find themselves in led many to formally request to return home to their original villages. The majority have been refused due to "security reasons". There has been a project of Village Return and Rehabilitation and of Centralised Villages, but these all demonstrate a further desire to control the area and link disparate settlements through a program of major road-building for easy military access. By flooding vast areas of land and making further tracts uninhabitable, the building of dams constitutes the most permanent and irrefutable denial of people's applications to return.

The lack of consultation, adequate compensation or a proper resettlement plan is a major flaw in the Ilisu dam project. The Turkish government is responsible, both under the Turkish constitution and under international law, for addressing this situation and must do so as a matter of urgency. Unfortunately, there appears to have been little real change in the Turkish government's approach to displacement since those IDPs now living in western Turkey were displaced. Recent developments in relation to the Ilisu dam clearly demonstrate the Turkish government's blatant disregard for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Kurds in Turkey. The lack of a satisfactory resettlement plan for those being displaced from villages affected by the Ilisu dam project suggest that rather than minimising displacement

and paying proper attention to its consequences where displacement is *the only feasible option*, the Turkish government is repeating its past mistakes. Likewise, it is the responsibility of the international community to prevent such a flawed project with no concrete long-term benefits from being allowed to go ahead. It is essential in all cases to integrate human rights and development.

I would like to end by telling you something that I heard from one of our friends in Ilisu yesterday that illustrates what an impossible situation the people of the region are in. He met a woman on the road near to where the dam is to be built, and she pointed out to him her land where a military station is being built for the security of the dam. When he told her that it was illegal and that they have the right to refuse to give the land to soldiers, she said: "But we are talking about the soldiers. They are a part of the state. How can I complain about what state does? I have lost my husband in the conflict in the region. I have just one son and I don't want to lose him by dealing with the military forces. I can't sacrifice my child for a piece of land."