

When Duty Calls

As Turkey's war with the Kurds heats up, more men are evading army service than doing it

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When Istanbul journalists Erhan Aykildiz and Ali Tefvik Berber aired interviews with members of the "People against War" group on a popular television program, "Antenna," last December, they hardly expected to become national celebrities as a result. But having been charged with broadcasting material that encourages draft-dodging, put before a military court and acquitted amid a popular uproar, the two have ended up as symbols of victory for freedom of speech in Turkey.

The program obviously touched a nerve in the Turkish military establishment: With violence between government forces and Kurdish insurgents raging more fiercely

prominence, had been denounced as a violation of freedom of speech by opposition politicians, the national media and international organizations such as Amnesty International and PEN. Aykildiz and Berber protested their innocence all along: In remarks made immediately after their arrest to the mass-circulation daily *Cumhuriyet*, they said they had no intention of encouraging draft evasion, but were merely doing their job as news reporters.

"We love this country as much as those who put us in jail," said Aykildiz. "The people who put this blot on Turkish democracy are the ones who should be ashamed."

But the military, which has seized power three times since 1960 and remains a

powerful force in Turkish politics, is not an institution to be affronted lightly, and the political establishment gave it full support. Asked to comment on the journalists' case at a pre-trial press conference, Turkish President Suleyman Demirel said: "No one can consider insulting the army as not being a crime. You have to protect the military."

Military service is compulsory for all men over 18, although those entering higher education can defer. The average term of duty ranges between 12 and 18 months, depending on family circumstances and a host of other factors.

While the military is considering reforming itself into a slimmer, more professional force, the army is currently built on a huge conscription base. Yet by the Ministry of Defense's own estimate, over 250,000 young Turks — half the total of 500,000 soldiers who are on active duty — are avoiding their army service. Independent observers say the number is more likely over 300,000.

All this comes at a time when the war in the southeast has reached new peaks. The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has been fighting for independence from Ankara since 1984, but what used to be dismissed by government officials as isolated "terrorist acts" in a remote corner of the country has

grown into a conflict too intense to ignore. Last year was by far the bloodiest yet, with over 4,000 civilians, PKK fighters and members of the security forces killed, according to Interior Ministry figures. The highest previous total was a year earlier, when some 2,650 people were killed. All told, over 10,500 lives have been lost so far in the conflict in Turkey, and hundreds more have died in cross-border raids by Turkish forces against PKK bases in northern Iraq. Yet many of the young generation simply do not consider this a war worth dying for.

"All of my friends are afraid to go into the army," said Zarife Ozturk, an English-teaching student at Istanbul University. The fighting in the southeast is "very real to us now," she added. "We all know people who have been hurt or killed there."

The simplest way for young men to avoid the draft is by prolonging their status as university students, by deliberately failing courses year after year or enrolling in easy television-based correspondence courses, an option open to thousands who might not otherwise qualify as members of the intellectual elite. Proposals are reportedly circulating among government and military officials that would tighten student-exemption requirements and make draft evasion punishable by up to five years in prison. Currently, when caught, evaders are merely made to do their service and sometimes are fined.

Arif Hikmet, who co-founded the "Istanbul War Resisters Organization" last September, said police have begun seeking evaders more aggressively in recent months. "I hear more and more people discussing whether they should cut off a finger or toe to get out of going," he said.

The issue has taken on particular poignancy for General Dogan Gures, the military's powerful chief of staff, whose son, Serder, has been persistently reported in the Turkish press to be avoiding his own military service by prolonging his stay in a drama conservatory. The younger Gures recently lashed out at journalists in an interview with the daily *Milliyet*, saying that "traitors" were behind the rumors, which were "damaging the morale of the soldiers in the east." He added that the press was pressuring him excessively and said, "If they go on like this, I could shoot a journalist."

The case of the two "Antenna" journalists was perceived by many as an attempt by the military to stifle discussion about draft evasion, and by extension, its handling of the PKK insurrection. Ismet Imset, news editor of the English-language Turkish Daily News, called the episode an attempt to intimidate the press. "Ironically," he added, "by doing so, they actually put the issue (of draft-dodging) at the top of the public agenda." □



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than ever in the southeast of the country, the army is facing a growing problem on the home front — draft evasion.

Aykildiz, 46, and Berber, 34, were arrested in mid-December after screening the documentary on the independent Istanbul-based HBB station about draft-dodging and desertion, including interviews with avowed draft resisters. The two went on trial on January 25 — Turkish law allows offenses against the military to be tried in military courts, even if committed by civilians — and had they been convicted, would have faced two years in jail.

The case, which catapulted the whole issue of evasion of military service into