

“All the voices of Kurdish politics must be heard, including those in Kongra Gel – an avowedly peaceful organization” – Mark Thomas

Time for Justice: No to the Ban on Kongra Gel

Report by David Morgan

A public meeting in the House of Commons timed to coincide with the Queen’s Speech on 15 November has been held to draw attention to the ban on Kongra Gel, a Kurdish organization committed to entirely non-violent political change inside Turkey, erroneously listed as a terrorist group earlier this year by Home Secretary John Reid. The meeting called by Mark Thomas, Peace in Kurdistan Campaign, CAMPACC and Liberation was hosted by Plaid Cymru MPs Elfyn Llwyd and Hywel Williams. The gathering in Parliament, which the UK authorities did not want to take place, was titled *“Time for Justice- No to the Ban on Kongra Gel”*, and sought to put on the UK agenda the implications of the ban on leading Kurdish political organizations for both civil liberties here and in Turkey and the Middle East as a whole. It also came at a time when Turkey’s progress on its accession to the European Union has been stalling as a direct result of its failure to improve human rights, in particular its continued denial of the rights of the Kurdish people.

A scheduled keynote speaker was to have been Remzi Kartal, a European spokesman for the banned Kongra Gel, but he was not given a visa to enter the UK, despite strong representations made by the organizers of the event. The decision to refuse Remzi the right to come to London set a new precedent, given his frequent visits to this country in the past and the fact that he is permitted to live openly in Brussels.

As was pointed out at the meeting, it should be stressed that Remzi is not only a respected former elected member of the Turkish Parliament, but he a leading figure in an organization that has never advocated violence in any shape or form; on the contrary, Kongra Gel has consistently advocated a peaceful political solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey. The ban on his visit turned out to be another indication of the unfairness of the UK ban on Kongra Gel and the remarkable silence of UK politicians in general on the appalling abuses that take place in Turkey.

The meeting occurred at a time when the Turkish state’s war against the PKK and Kongra-Gel continues, despite the recent renewal of the ceasefire by the PKK and Kongra-Gel, and when human rights violations of Kurdish organizations, journalists, publishers, writers and trade unionists have been increasing at an alarming level.

Speakers at the meeting urged support for a ceasefire, dialogue and a political solution to the unresolved conflict between Turkey and the Kurds. Prominent human rights organisations, peace campaigners, intellectuals and writers in Turkey - and internationally - have been supporting this peace initiative. Failure to do so, the meeting heard, could well lead to a return of the terrible times of the 1990s – a dark era in Turkish history when thousands were ‘disappeared’ by state-linked forces, an ‘Emergency’ was declared, ‘thought’ was declared a ‘crime’, villages were bombed and depopulated, the economy

was destabilised, the 'contra-guerrilla' and the unaccountable 'mafia-deep state' was allowed to hold sway.

Pointing to the recent unilateral ceasefire announced in October by the Kurdish side, Remzi, in a message read out by Estella Schmid, reminded the meeting that this was the fourth successive ceasefire that the Kurds had adopted over recent years.

All previous ceasefires had eventually collapsed because of the failure of the Turkish side to respond in equal measure. The responsibility for this lay not only with Turkey, however, but with the powers in Europe and the US, who were in a position to exert some influence on their ally, he stressed.

Remzi's message continued: "It is time to solve the Kurdish issue in Turkey, which is a serious obstacle to achieving democracy in the whole region. I also believe that the European countries, in particular the UK, have a historic responsibility to play a role in finding a solution.

"I urge the UK Government to rethink its decision to ban Kongra Gel and the PKK and to recognize that this ban is an obstacle to any permanent peace and stability not only in Turkey but in the whole region.

"The UK Government should lift this ban which criminalises the Kurds and urge the EU to take action to find a solution to the conflict during this ceasefire period," Remzi concluded.

Comedian Mark Thomas, who has long campaigned to highlight the discrimination facing Kurdish people in Turkey, was planning to carry out an interview with Remzi for one of his television programmes. In a solidarity message, the comedian expressed disappointment that Remzi had been refused a visa by the UK authorities, a "blow for liberty" which he described as a form of censorship of his work.

"The UK government has made a fatal mistake: rather than using the opportunity of Turkey trying to gain entry into the EU as a moment to pressure Turkey into reform, the UK government has squandered this chance. Now that the EU has said that Turkey must improve the rights of minorities, surely one would think that this would be the time to press for Turkey to change and engage with the Kurds on trying to resolve the Kurdish Question," Mark Thomas said.

"Instead the UK has sought to back Turkey's further oppression of the Kurds under the guise of fighting terrorism. This in particular applies to Kongra Gel. The UK government has no evidence to back their claim Kongra Gel is the front of the PKK. Yet they added Kongra Gel to the proscribed list, thus denying legitimate chance for Kurds to enter the political debate on their own future. Rather than sponsor this chance for dialogue, the UK government choose to back Turkey in its attempts to silence Kurdish dissent," the message continued.

“All the voices of Kurdish politics must be heard, which include those in Kongra Gel- an avowedly peaceful organisation whose members feature prominent Kurdish leaders from the democratic and non-violent movements for Kurdish human rights. Yes, there are some ex-PKK members in Kongra Gel, but this is no reason to justify the claim that it is a PKK front. Without these voices, the dialogue for peace can mean nothing,” Mark Thomas stated.

A young female Kurdish activist, who described herself as a former member of Kongra-Gel based in the UK, appealed for the repeal of the ban which she described as unjust and dispiriting for all Kurdish people. The ban had gagged her from speaking out freely. She also called on UK politicians to acknowledge that any proposed solution that excludes Abdullah Ocalan and the PKK would never be accepted by the Kurdish people.

The threat posed by the terrorism bans on civil and political liberties of the wider population was highlighted by other speakers at the meeting. These included Jeremy Corbyn MP, Hugo Charlton, human rights barrister, Ben Hayes, from Statewatch, Desmond Fernandes, a member of the Advisory Council of the EUTCC, Les Levidow, from CAMPACC, policy analyst Nick Hildyard and barrister Hugo Charlton. Completing the panel was Alattin Erdogan, Vice-Chair of the Kurdish Democratic Society Party of Turkey, who was currently on a delegation to London.

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Abbreviations:

CAMPACC = Campaign Against Criminalising Communities

EUTCC = EU Turkey Civic Commission

KONGRA-GEL = People’s Congress of Kurdistan

PKK = Kurdistan Workers Party

Attached full text of messages of Mark Thomas and Remzi Kartal