



Weekly Almanac

[Event of the week] Turkey shocked as assailants kill 44 at engagement ceremony in Mardin

Turkey was trying to overcome the shock last week of an armed attack on Monday night against the participants of an engagement ceremony in the village of Bilge in the southeastern province of Mardin, in which dozens of people were killed.



Masked assailants, who later turned out to be state-sponsored village guards, opened fire on civilians with automatic weapons during the engagement ceremony, killing 44 people and injuring two others. Sixteen of the victims were women and six were children, Interior Minister Beşir Atalay said following the attack. Three of the women were reportedly pregnant. The attack was one of the worst involving civilians in Turkey's recent history. Reports suggested that the assault was the result of a dispute between families over whom the bride should marry. Many state officials rushed to Mardin to pay visits to grieving villagers. Parliament Speaker Köksal Toptan said he was horrified by the assault, adding that no one should have the slightest doubt that the assailants will soon be captured and punished. Ten suspects were arrested on Wednesday for their involvement in the attack. Among those arrested was a 14-year-old boy. Around 100 villagers fled their homes in Bilge in fear of revenge attacks for the massacre. The fact that the attack was perpetrated by village guards, using the weapons provided to them by the state, sparked a debate on the village guard system in Turkey, which was established in 1986 as a paramilitary force to protect villages against attacks carried out by the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). On Thursday, Deputy Prime Minister Cemil Çiçek announced that the government would take the necessary steps to overhaul or abolish the system in the wake of Monday's brutal attack.

May 2

Rifat Hisarcıkıoğlu was re-elected as chairman of the Turkish Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges (TOBB), which held its 64th general assembly in Ankara. Hisarcıkıoğlu received every valid vote cast, for a total of 1,362, making him the TOBB head for the next four years.

May 3

Deputies, members and mayors from the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) began a two-day hunger strike in Diyarbakır to protest the arrests of 52 DTP members, including the party's three deputy chairpersons. DTP Chairman Ahmet Türk, who was among the strike participants, said that, although the government and even the chief of general staff emphasize the necessity of getting members of the outlawed Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) to defect and return to Turkish society, such arrests would encourage the members of the terrorist organization to do the opposite.

Constitutional Court Vice President Osman Paksüt is facing a criminal complaint over information he leaked to third parties about cases under deliberation by the top court, the Taraf daily reported. According to the report, the top prosecutor in the investigation against Ergenekon, a clandestine group charged with plotting to topple the government, recently filed a criminal complaint against Paksüt, accusing him of leaking information about ongoing judicial cases. Prosecutor Zekeriya Öz cited phone conversations recorded by the İstanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's

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May 4

The recently reshuffled Cabinet, headed by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, held its first meeting with the participation of its newly appointed ministers. Erdoğan announced changes to the Cabinet on May 1 in the wake of the March 29 local elections and amidst the ongoing global financial crisis. Eight ministers were removed from Cabinet seats, while nine new ministers were appointed. In addition, seven ministers were moved to different posts in the 27-member Cabinet.

Masked assailants opened fire on civilians with automatic weapons during an engagement ceremony in the southeastern province of Mardin, killing 44 people and injuring two others. Reports suggested that the assault was the result of a dispute between families over the bride.

Six people were killed and 21 were injured in a traffic accident in the central province of Konya.

May 5

The PKK wants a mutual cease-fire and hopes this will be followed by peace talks, announced Murat Karayılan, the acting leader of the terrorist organization who assumed power after the group's top leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was captured by Turkish security forces. Milliyet daily columnist Hasan Cemal met with Karayılan at a PKK training base in the Kandil Mountains in northern Iraq for a four-hour interview, during which the PKK leader discussed his hopes for a cease-fire and extensive peace talks with the Turkish government for the settlement of Turkey's longstanding terror issue.

The deputies of the Afghan and Pakistani parliaments met in Ankara and pledged continuous friendship and an alliance between their countries. The meeting was part of Turkey's efforts to ease disputes between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The presidents of the two countries have met three times in Turkey so far to discuss security cooperation along their troubled border.

The National Unity Party (UBP), the winner of last month's parliamentary elections in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (KKTC), formed the sixth government in the history of the Turkish Cypriot state. UBP leader Derviş Eroğlu is now serving his eighth term in office.

Main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Deniz Baykal met with President Abdullah Gül at the Çankaya presidential palace upon Gül's invitation. Baykal said he accepted the invitation to discuss state affairs.

A soldier died in a blast from a land mine believed to have been planted by the outlawed PKK in eastern Bitlis province. The explosion occurred as Senior Master Sgt. Aygün Bulut was patrolling an urban area in the Hizan district. Bulut was taken to a nearby military hospital in Bitlis but was pronounced dead on arrival.

May 6

In his first official trip as foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu visited Lefkoşa to meet with KKTC leaders, reiterating his support for reunification efforts led by Turkish Cypriot President Mehmet Ali Talat and calling on all parties, including the European Court of Justice, which recently rattled the Turkish Cypriot administration with a controversial property ruling, to do the same. "Everyone should avoid steps that could negatively affect the Cyprus talks and everyone, including international courts, should support the efforts led by Mr. Talat," Davutoğlu said in a press conference after talks with the Turkish Cypriot president in Lefkoşa.

President Gül received Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli at the Çankaya palace to discuss foreign policy and constitutional amendments.

May 7

A top government minister announced that the highly disputed village guard system may either be overhauled or abolished in the wake of a brutal attack in southeastern Mardin province in which 44 people were killed. Deputy Prime Minister Cemil Çiçek told reporters that the

government would revise the village guard system in the country, which would result either in the reformation or abolishment of the controversial system.

The 2009 Europe Prize, one of four awards offered by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) to local authorities for their promotion of the European ideal, was awarded to Ankara. The decision was made unanimously by the PACE Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs.

President Gül received DTP leader Türk at the Çankaya presidential palace as part of his ongoing meetings with the leaders of political parties represented in Parliament.

An inquiry was launched into Constitutional Court Vice President Paksüt over his frequent phone conversations with eight individuals who are currently standing trial as suspects in the case against Ergenekon. Ergenekon prosecutor Öz recently notified Constitutional Court President Haşim Kılıç that Paksüt's phone conversations were being wiretapped after it was discovered that he had made phone calls to eight Ergenekon suspects, whose names have not been released.

Former Chief of General Staff Gen. Yaşar Büyükanıt stated that he was the author of a controversial memorandum released on the General Staff Web site on April 27, 2007 that weighed in on the presidential election process. "It was me who penned the statement. It was on Friday. Why on Friday? Because I was supposed to leave Ankara for some time on Saturday. Thus, we wanted the statement to be posted on the Web site before I left the city. ... I was even surer of its correctness when a closure case was filed against the Justice and Development Party [AK Party]," Büyükanıt said on "32. Gün," a debate program aired by private TV station Kanal D.

There is a momentous opportunity for the resolution of disputes between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2009, President Gül said, as international mediators in Prague reported progress in talks between leaders of the two countries on their territorial dispute. "The year 2009 is a year of opportunity for the resolution of problems. We need to resolve problems with the momentum we have gathered," Gül told journalists on a plane en route to Prague. "If we fail to seize the opportunity, it will be very hard for the process to restart."

May 8

First lady Hayrünnisa Gül said she mourned all night with her husband, the president, for the 44 people who were killed on Monday in the southeastern province of Mardin. "I heard the news from my husband. We were so sorrowful that we couldn't sleep all night," the first lady said. Her remarks came during a flight to the southeastern province of Şanlıurfa, where she attended a book festival to promote reading.

Turkey is not breaking away from the European Union and is not becoming a more Middle East-oriented country, Finland's top diplomat said. In an exclusive interview with Today's Zaman, Finnish Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Stubb said, "For Turkey to have very good relations with the Middle East is beneficial for the West, as well." He described Turkey as "the lynchpin between the East and the West." Stubb said he was "pro-Turk" and reiterated the support of the Finnish government for Turkey's candidacy for European Union membership. "I would like to see more chapters opened in the negotiation process," he added.

According to recent figures released by Eurostat, the official statistics institution of the European Union, Turks ranked ninth among those seeking refugee status in EU member countries last year. The first five spots were filled by Iraqis, Russians, Serbs, Somalis and Afghans. Among the 238,365 refugee applications to EU countries last year, 6,920 came from Turkish citizens. The highest number of applications from Turks was to France and Germany, which received 2,925 and 1,775 formal requests, respectively. These were followed by Austria and Belgium, to which Turks submitted 800 applications in total in 2008.

10 May 2009, Sunday

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