

Member of banned Turkish folk group dies after hunger strike

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Singer Helin Bolek, 28, of Grup Yorum, was protesting against government's treatment of group

A member of a popular folk music group that is banned in Turkey has died on the 288th day of a hunger strike. The singer and a colleague had started the strike while imprisoned to protest at the government's treatment of their band, according to a post on the group's Twitter account.

Grup Yorum, known for their protest songs, said Helin Bolek, 28, had died on Friday at a home in Istanbul where she had been staging the hunger strike in an attempt to pressure the government into reversing its position on the band and its members.

Grup Yorum is a folk collective with a rotating membership. The group has been prohibited from performing in Turkey since 2016, and authorities have jailed some of its members.

The government accuses Grup Yorum of links to the outlawed Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front, or DHKP/C. The militant group is designated as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the United States and the European Union.

Bolek and a fellow band member, Ibrahim Gokcek, had embarked on the hunger strike while in prison to press the government to lift the ban and free detained band members. They were released in November.

The two were demanding that Grup Yorum be allowed to resume concerts, that jailed band members be released and that lawsuits against the group be dropped. Two Grup Yorum band members, including Gokcek's wife, remain in prison. Bolek and Gokcek were forcibly taken to hospital on 11 March but discharged a week later after they refused treatment, the Ankara-based Human Rights Association, or IHD, said.

IHD said a delegation of human rights activists met Turkey's deputy interior minister last month to seek a solution that would end the hunger strike. The government refused to assess the demands until the protest was called off, the association said.

Zulfu Livaneli, a popular Turkish singer and songwriter who sang with Grup Yorum during one of their 2012 concerts, expressed sadness over Bolek's death on Twitter, saying the struggle to prevent hunger strikes from not resulting in death "has unfortunately failed".

Hunger strikers in Turkey traditionally refuse food but consume liquids that prolong their protests.

Associated Press (AP) in Ankara

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