

Diyarbakir : a city worries in anonymity

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Westerners watching reports on the increasing number of Turkey's soldier fatalities expect Diyarbakir to be a place of tension and conflict. But daily life goes on in a calm atmosphere, despite the deep anxiety people express in nameless conversation.

An elderly Kurdish man sat outside of a café at the 1,400-year-old Great Mosque this week responding in Kurdish to a question about the latest clashes with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) on the northern Iraqi border. "I do not know anything."

"He knows, but he does not want to talk about it," said Ahmet Aktoprak, who was translating from Kurdish. The man was most likely worried about talking with a stranger about recent developments along northern Iraqi border. This attitude exemplifies a worry common among many people in Diyarbakir these days. He chose to remain silent, even as Aktoprak sat nearby frankly discussing his feelings about the recent developments. Aktoprak does not represent most Kurds, most of whom decline to give their names when talking with the Turkish Daily News.

Keeping their names secret

Ofis, the new part of the city where the majority of university students frequent brand-name shops, shops and cafes is well known for its vibrant social life especially at night. People and students sit in cafes, shop and stroll. However, the number of people coming to Ofis has fallen dramatically, especially after the latest clash last Sunday, said İbrahim, a salesman from Ofis. He did not want to give his surname, saying "This is Diyarbakir; it is not clear who is who."

The people who came from towns in the west, especially students, were much more afraid than the locals, İbrahim said. "We got used to it, we are not afraid," he said, identifying the people sitting in cafes as locals. "Especially the students' families are afraid," he said.

Two university students who came to Diyarbakir from Anatolian provinces confirmed this. "Our families are more afraid than us," said an architectural student, who asked for anonymity, saying "Innocent people have been jailed in the past."

The other student, who is studying to be an English teacher, declined to give her name as well, saying that with events developing the way they are, it was not logical to volunteer her name.

Many students were as worried as they were afraid. "I am extremely disturbed to hear the sound of police radios on many of the civilians I pass," she said, adding that the number of civil police had increased dramatically. Students said that Ofis used to be so crowded, especially Sanat Street where cafes host mostly students. "Look at this, only a few people are out," the second student said.

Life goes on

Westerners watching reports on the increasing number of Turkey's soldier fatalities expect Diyarbakir, home to more Kurds than any other in the world, to be a place of tension and conflict. With Turkey featured at the top of news broadcasts around the world and the ongoing debate about a cross-border operation or an economic embargo, it might surprise people that daily life goes on here in a calm atmosphere, despite the deep anxiety people express in nameless conversation.

“We are worried,” because of the developments, said Süleyman Şerefhanoglu, while he was shopping in a mall. People want to be comfortable, he said. Zeynep Öktem, 22, said she was worried as well, but she emphasized that they live in a very comfortable environment in Diyarbakır generally, especially after the state of emergency ended in the late 1990s. A teacher, who had left Diyarbakır to take a job elsewhere, said that living in Diyarbakır was not that different from other cities, but she was also worried in general about living in the troubled region given the latest events.

What if something sets off a spark ?

Protest in other provinces around the country annoy many in Diyarbakır, who fear these might damage relations between Turks and Kurds. Moreover, they are afraid tensions might escalate to civil war if events continue to develop in this way. Many of them characterize protests in other cities as provocation.

Aktoprak, who migrated to Istanbul for economic reasons but returned to Diyarbakır to visit relatives said that members of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) had been asking for IDs in Istanbul’s neighborhood Bağcılar and cursed at people who were Kurdish. “An internal war will erupt if things goes on like that,” he said, “Our relatives here are so worried for us.” The protests in other cities increase the hate, said Erdinç, a taxi driver.

People in Diyarbakır have lived with so much pain that they think twice before reacting, said Zeynep Demir Akçer, adviser with the Kardelen Women’s House in the Bağlar municipality that provides counseling and support for women. Many people here say they are still affected by the March 2006 events in which 10 people died in clashes between security forces and protestors following the funeral of 14 PKK militants killed in a clash with the army.

“Everywhere is intense, but not Diyarbakır,” said Mustafa Koç, another taxi driver. However, “Even a little spark will ignite very bad events here,” he said. “People would escape, but those who [remain] to earn their bread would be harmed.”

Sources

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