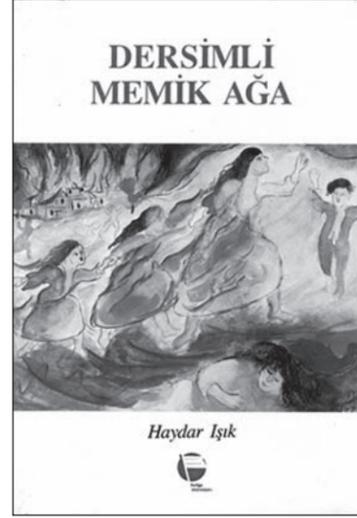
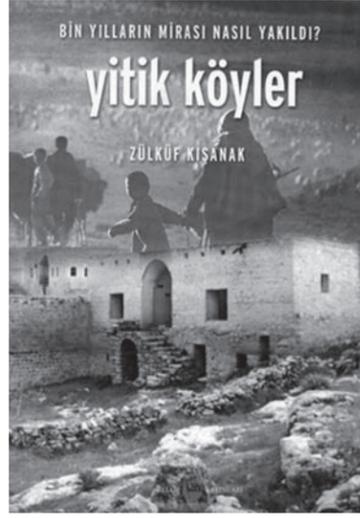


# Launch of 'Friends of Belge'

## An Appeal for Solidarity

### Desmond Fernandes



Ragip Zarakolu, owner and director of Belge publishing house, was the recipient of Turkey's Journalists' Society's Press Freedom Prize in 2007, alongside the late Hrant Dink and Gülcin Caylıgil. He also received the International Publishers Association's 2008 *Freedom to Publish Prize* "for his exemplary courage in upholding freedom to publish", and has been the recipient of other awards such as the NOVIB/PEN 2003 *Free Expression Award*. In 2007, Ragip also participated in the 7th Biennial Meeting of the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS), hosted by the University of Sarajevo's Institute for Research into Crimes against Humanity and International Law and received the IAGS Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Battle against Deniers of the Armenian Genocide and All Denials of Genocides.

Ragip and Belge publishing (*belge* meaning *documents*) have been subject to targeting in ongoing court cases in Turkey that clearly breach internationally recognised rights of free expression. In November 2009, for example, Ragip and writer N. Mehmet Güler, as defendants, were absurdly "facing prison sentences" based upon the dialogue of a character in a novel. "Publisher Ragip Zarakolu stated in ... [the 19 November 2009] hearing: 'As the chairman of the Committee of Freedom of Expression and Publishing and as a publisher, I cannot do censorship'. Zarakolu is [being] tried ... because of the book *Decisions Tougher than Death (Ölümden Zor Kararlar)* published by Belge Publishing in March [2009] ... [The] defendants are facing prison sentences based on article 7/2 of the Anti-Terror Law (TMY) because characters of the book are called 'Siti', 'Sabri' and 'Şiyar'. Zarakolu has been chairman of the Turkey Publishers Association (TYB) Committee for Freedom of Publishing for 15 years. He stated: 'The novel plays in [a] historical period Turkey lived through. There are similar examples in world literature. Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, for instance, deals with the Spanish civil war ...' ... President Judge Zafer Başkurt reviewed the file and decided to postpone the case till 25th March 2010. Zarakolu stated that the pressure 'has come as far as prosecuting the heroes of a novel'. ... Istanbul Public Prosecutor Hikmet Usta based his indictment of 22 May on dialogue in the novel" (BIA, Erol Önderoğlu, 20 November 2009).

As Vercihan Ziflioğlu noted in a 9th December 2009 article entitled 'Fictional characters from book on trial in Turkey': "Fictional characters are being put on trial again in Turkey. *Ölümden Zor Kararlar (Decisions Tougher than Death)*, a novel by N. Mehmet Güler that was published through

Belge International Publishing last March, has become the focus of a criminal case ... Author Güler and publisher Zarakolu are standing trial at the Istanbul Court of Serious Crimes. The novel was added to the list of banned books in June and copies have been recalled from the market ... Many writers and translators have been put on trial in recent years under Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code. The first example of *imaginary characters* standing trial occurred with Elif Şafak's novel, *The Bastard of Istanbul*. Şafak stood trial for 'insulting Turkishness' through an Armenian character in her novel and was acquitted ... 'The trial turned out to be like a present for my 40th anniversary in journalism', said Zarakolu, who is a found[ing member] of a human rights association and won many national and international prizes for journalism. 'Over 50 cases have been opened against me...', he said. 'Should the writer be free

"I am here today since *thought* has been deemed a 'crime', indeed a *terrorist crime*"

in his thoughts or should he serve the principles of the state and militarism?' He compared current conditions to living in the era of Sultan Abdülhamit and noted that the 'oppressor mentality' must be overcome ...".

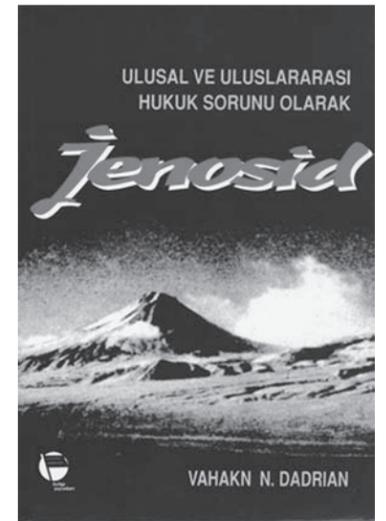
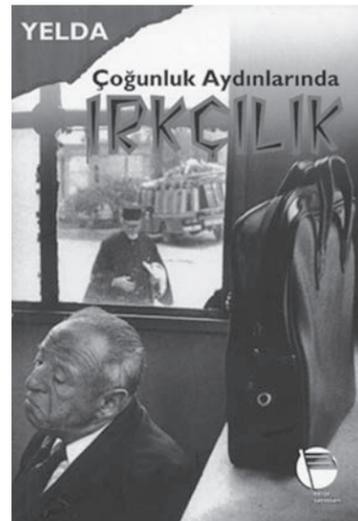
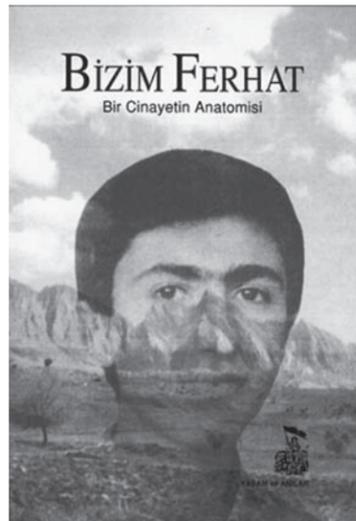
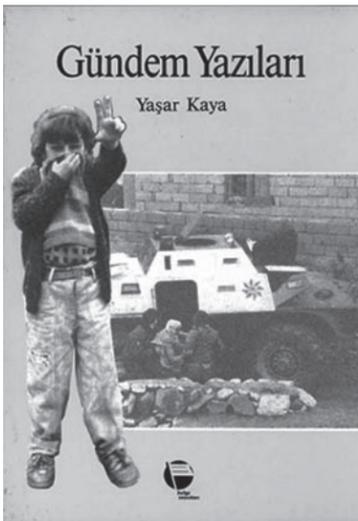
Previously, cases were initiated against Ragip and Belge for publishing Professor Dora Sakayan's *Garabed Hacheryan's Izmir Journal: An Armenian Doctor's Experiences* and George Jerjian's *The truth will set us free/Armenians and Turks Reconciled*. As Bjorn Smith-Simonsen, Chairman of the IPA Freedom to Publish Committee, had observed at the time: "Ragip Zarakolu has been subjected to a series of long, time-consuming and expensive court hearings ... The conduct of the trial in itself has begun to take the form of harassment and punishment against the defendant for *daring to produce works that touch on sensitive issues*" (IPA/IFEX, 14 December 2007).

As BIA News noted in 2002, whole print-runs of dozens of books at Belge had previously been confiscated and in 1995 the offices of publishing house Belge, run by Ragip and the late Ayse Zarakolu, "were fire-bombed": "Run from a basement in Istanbul, Belge published pioneering books acknowledging the Kurds' very existence and historical works on the atrocities in the early years of the twentieth century against the Ottoman

Empire's large Armenian minority Armenians – and on the Greeks ... The publication in the early 1990s of the poems of Medhi Zana in *Kurdish* was enough to bring charges of *separatist propaganda* under the draconian anti-terrorism law. In 1997, [Belge] published in Turkish *Wie teuer ist die Freiheit? (What's the cost of freedom?)*, a collection of articles and reports by German journalist Lissy Schmidt, who had been killed three years earlier on assignment in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq. The book was banned and confiscated by the government, while [Ayse] Zarakolu and the book's two translators were sent for trial ...

"In 1977, [the late Ayse] and Ragip set up Belge with the mission of 'striking down taboos' and 'investigating the rights of minorities' ... In 1990, [Belge] published a work by Ismail Besikci, a sociologist who was the first academic to work on ... the Kurdish question and about the Kurdish people in Turkey and who was imprisoned for 15 years for his books. [Ayse] Zarakolu became the first publisher imprisoned under Turkey's 1991 anti-terror law when she was jailed for five months for printing another book by Besikci in 1993. 'I am here today since *thought* has been deemed a "crime", indeed a *terrorist crime*', she wrote from her prison cell. 'Like writers, publishers are also preparing their suitcases not for new studies and works but for prison ... As long as people cannot express their identities and their views, they are *not* really free', she wrote just before her arrest in 1994. 'We believe in what we are doing. Despite fines and possible future prison sentences, we at Belge will continue to give suppressed voices a chance to be heard. If we persist, we will win'."

Belge has also faced court cases for publishing Vahakn Dadrian's *Genocide as a Problem of National and International Law*. Other published books have included: Migirdich Armen's *Heghnar's Fountain*; Franz Werfel's *Forty Days in Musa Dagh*; Tessa Hoffman's *Talaat Pasha Trials in Berlin*; David Gaunt's *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors (Katliamlar, Direniş, Koruyucular)* about the Assyrian Genocide (in Turkish); Avetis Ahorianian's *The Fedayees*; Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate* and the Turkish translation of *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*. A book on the history of the Turkish Communist Party, published in 1982, "was banned and later burned by the generals as a threat to social order and Ragip's wife was brought to trial" (BBC News, 12 April 2008). Targeting has taken on many forms: Ayse was "denied a passport between 1993 and 1998 (it was returned the day after she had been due to fly to Germany to pick up an award at the Frankfurt Book Fair)" (Bianet, 15 February 2002). Ragip "was banned from travelling outside the country between 1971 and



1991” (Kemal Ozmen, Bianet, 18 January 2005).

As Jean Rafferty has noted with concern: “Ragıp Zarakolu has spent a total of two years in prison, some of it *in isolation*. His publishing house has been firebombed; he has had constant financial struggles, but still he carries on, not just writing his own articles but publishing [via Belge] and distributing radical literature by others ... In 1977, he and his wife Ayşe set up a publishing house to print the works of independent thinkers. Their range included classic political theorists such as Tom Paine and John Stuart Mill ... In the 1980’s, after the military coup by General Kenan Evren, the couple began publishing a series of works by people who had been in prison. ‘They were writing their poetry on little pieces of paper, which they sent secretly, sewn into shirts and other things. Nearly half a million were imprisoned in five years. A generation of university students stayed there a long time. With my wife, we thought it was very important to get their voices to the outside. The military authorities thought all the younger generation were *terrorists* but we wanted to show their culture. We published poetry, novels, stories, reportage. Some of them won awards’. And some of them were sentenced to death ... Ragıp Zarakolu and his wife were watched the whole time, their phones tapped. Many other publishers were unable to take the pressure. They themselves closed their own publishing houses and bookshops. Some even burnt books in their own homes”. But Ragıp and Ayşe continued to publish. “He was arrested in 1982; she was arrested in 1984. She was tortured ... Ayşe was a remarkable woman who was tried many times and who won many humanitarian awards in her lifetime. In 1984, she was arrested because she had given a job to a student who was wanted by the police. They tortured her to find out where he was. She refused to tell them ... ‘She was a very courageous woman’, says Ragıp. ‘She always succeeded not to go into depression or helplessness. She felt good because she could do something against power. She felt solidarity with people suffering’ ... The ‘Kurdish question’ – otherwise known as the genocide of ... Kurds – is one of the most contentious issues in Turkey today. Both Zarakolus had spoken out openly about it and about the genocide of a million Armenians from 1915 till the establishment of the Turkish state in 1923” (Jean Rafferty, Norsk PEN – Accessed at: <http://www.norskpen.no/pen/Zarakolu2.html>). In 2004, the European Court of Human Rights “condemned Turkey ... for convicting publisher Ayşe Nur Zarakolu for publishing a book about the murder of journalist Ferhat Tepe” (*Reporters Without Borders*, 19 August 2007).

English PEN has confirmed that a trial against Ragıp and Belge “opened on 24 September 2003 under article 312 of the Penal Code for publication of the book *12 Eylül Rejimi Yargılanıyor* (*The Regime of 12 September on Trial*), edited by Dr Gazi Çağlar. [It was] said to have referred to the activities of the Turkish forces in South Eastern Turkey as ‘organised genocide’” (English PEN). Owen Bowcott (*The Guardian*, 13 April 2002) also noted the way in which Ayşe Zarakolu was being targeted by the state even after she passed away: “Two weeks after the death of this internationally renowned publisher, a letter arrived from No 1 state security court, ordering her to appear at 9am on March 21. ‘We have opened a case against you, in absentia’, the summons warned. ‘If you

do not come, you will be arrested’. After her son was arrested for his funeral oration, the trial date arrived. The lawyers assumed their positions and proceedings began. ‘It was like something out of the pages of Kafka’, says her widower, Ragıp Zarakolu. ‘Everybody was there: the prosecutor, advocate, judges, correspondents, friends. Only the place of the accused was empty’ ... Zarakolu’s alleged crime involved publication of a work entitled *The Song Of Liberty* by Huseyin Turhali, an exiled Kurdish lawyer. She is also being summonsed from her grave to answer charges that she published *The Culture Of Pontus*, an anthropological study by Omer Assan examining the ancient Greek heritage of the region around Trabzon on the Black Sea ...”.

A joint June 2008 statement by International PEN Writers in Prison Committee and the International Publishers’ Association confirmed, after another trial that Ragıp Zarakolu and Belge faced, that: “Observers believe that Zarakolu is being singled out by the more conservative elements of the judiciary because of his decades of struggle for freedom of expression, and particularly his promotion of minority rights. Throughout his life, Ragıp Zarakolu has been

## pressure “has come as far as prosecuting the heroes of a novel”

subjected to a series of long, time-consuming and expensive court hearings. The conduct of the trial in itself took the form of harassment and punishment against the defendant for daring to produce works, which touch on sensitive issues such as the Armenian question, Kurdish and minority rights. The condemnation of Ragıp Zarakolu shows that the recent cosmetic change to Article 301 TPC was not enough to put an end to freedom of expression trials in Turkey. Turkish legislation ... must be amended or repealed to meet international standards, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union”.

Ragıp’s 2008 acceptance speech for the IPA Freedom to Publish award noted the following: “A deeply militarist mindset lays deep roots ... Unfortunately, since September 11, 2001, national security state anti-terror laws have been given even more power in Turkey – indeed, in many countries – to restrict freedom of expression. Our publishing house, Belge International Publishing, was targeted under anti-terror laws when we published books about the Kurdish Question and the Armenian genocide. *Books that critiqued state terror and condemned terrorism were accused under anti-terror law*. The Erdoğan government reformed the anti-terror law in 2004, deleting a clause that controlled the opposition press. But in 2006 the National Security Council demanded that the clause be restored in a stricter form. Now the Kurdish and opposition publications may be silenced for a year waiting for trials to begin. Their defence lawyers’ rights are restricted. Jailed journalists are sent to special isolation prisons where they have fewer rights than ‘ordinary’ criminals ...”.

## The “Friends of Belge” Initiative

One of the aims of ‘Friends of Belge’ is to raise a solidarity fund to support Belge as it continues to be targeted in the ways outlined above. As Ara Sarafian observed in 2009, Mr. Zarakolu of Belge Press, amongst other things, “has been persecuted by the state for his involvement with the Armenian issue. Zarakolu is now facing considerable difficulties because of the cost of remaining active in Turkey. *When you are prosecuted, your offices bombed, your books banned, or bookstore owners ‘discouraged’ from carrying your books, there are inevitable consequences. Zarakolu needs financial support to remain afloat*” (Vincent Lima, Armenian Reporter, 1 July 2009). Bjorn Smith-Simonsen, Chairman of the IPA Freedom to Publish Committee, further confirms that “Ragıp Zarakolu has been subjected to a series of long, time-consuming and expensive court hearings. [One] case was postponed at least seven times since the first hearing in March 2005” (IPA/IFEX, 14 December 2007). In April 2008, four members of the European Parliament – Mrs Koppa, Mr Toubon, Mr Gaubert and Mr Kasoulides – “sent a letter to the Turkish Minister of Justice, Mr Sahin, in order to inform him of the Unions concern about the trial developments” facing Ragıp Zarakolu and Belge Press. “The MEP’s mention[ed] that the ‘long, costly and morally exhausting’ trial” he faced came “from ‘judicial relentlessness’”. They were also “worried about Mr Zarakolu’s ‘physical security’ regarding ‘nationalistic renewal in Turkey’, especially revealed by the ‘murder of Hrant Dink and the revelations referring to the criminal organization Ergenekon’. The MEPs ask[ed] Mr Sahin to ‘abrogate without any delay the 301 article and similar clauses’ of the Turkish Penal Code and ‘other legislative and statutory texts which are effective in Turkey’. They also ask[ed] for the cessation of ‘iniquitous prosecutions’ [against Mr Zarakolu]” (European Armenian Federation, 20 April 2008).

As ‘Friends of Belge’, we aim to provide whatever international solidarity and financial and moral support we can offer Ragıp Zarakolu and Belge Press. ‘Friends of Belge’ will issue regular press releases and e-bulletins to members alerting ‘friends’, concerned members of the public, human rights and freedom of expression campaigners, organisations, MPs and MEPs about the ongoing nature of court cases against Belge and other publishers in Turkey facing similar problems. We invite you to become a ‘Friend of Belge’ by emailing us and informing us of your interest in becoming a member. There is no fee for membership. If you are able to contribute in any financial manner towards the solidarity fund, please contact us to do so – all proceeds go to supporting Belge Press. No sums of money are diverted in any manner towards those running ‘Friends of Belge’. For any further information, or to request becoming a ‘Friend’ and/or to receive free e-mail updates, please contact us at: [friendsofbelge@gmail.com](mailto:friendsofbelge@gmail.com) or via ‘Friends of Belge Publishing’, 7 Nant Ffynnon, Nant Peris, Gwynedd, LL55 4UG.

We hope you will join and support us in this initiative.

‘Friends of Belge’: Patrons Professor Noam Chomsky and Rosie Malek-Yonan