Turkey's troubled southeast saw a sharp rise in human rights abuses last month, with more than a third of detainees complaining they had been tortured by police, a leading rights group said on Tuesday.

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Diyarbakir (Turkey): Turkey rejects charges from human rights observers that torture remains "systematic" in the country. It has passed a number of reforms to expand rights and convince the European Union to launch entry talks next year. The European Commission in a report on Turkey's progress last week said the EU should begin negotiations with the populous Muslim country if its rights drive remains on track. While the Commission praised the government for its efforts to eradicate torture, it said reports about specific cases continued to cause concern. "We were expecting a decline in rights violations in our region in September ahead of the EU progress report," said Selahattin Demirtas, head of the Human Rights Association's (IHD) branch in the southeastern capital of Diyarbakir. "But our expectations were not realised, and extremely serious violations against fundamental rights and freedoms were experienced," Demirtas told reporters at a news conference. IHD said the rights of 446 people were violated in September in the southeast. Of the 155 people who were detained last month, 55 said they had been tortured. Investigations or legal proceedings were launched against 34 people on charges violating their freedom of expression. Demirtas accused the government of doing nothing to stem the violence in the mainly Kurdish southeast after security forces and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) renewed their fight in recent months. Clashes have been on the rise since the PKK ended its six-year unilateral ceasefire on June 1. The PKK's violent separatist campaign in the 1980s and 1990s killed more than 30,000 people, mainly Kurds. Fighting between soldiers and the PKK claimed 34 lives in September, IHD said. It accused the state of emptying one village and burning forests in operations against the rebels. Separately, a Turkish soldier was killed and two were wounded on Tuesday in a landmine blast in the centre of the town of Ovacik in nearby Tunceli province, the governor said. "Our soldiers were jogging during their regular morning exercises when they inadvertently stepped on a mine planted by PKK militants," Governor Mustafa Erkal told Reuters. "A wide-ranging operation with air support is now underway." Several soldiers have been killed in landmine explosions in recent months. Civilians, including children, have also been victims. Last week two children were killed after picking up a mine left in a field near the Iraqi border.

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 <<< zurück zu: News

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