

**OSCE High-Level Conference on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination  
(Including Human Rights Youth Education on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination)  
Tirana, 21-22 May 2013**

**Ecumenical Federation of Constantinopolitans**

**The Religious Freedoms and Rights of the Greek-Orthodox Community of Istanbul**

The case of Greek-Orthodox Community of Istanbul, together with the Communities of the two Aegean islands Gokceada-Imbros and Bozcaada-Tenedos belonging to Turkey, is a typical case where the principles of Remedy and Reparations as well as the respect of the religious freedoms and rights as expressed by the International law is applicable.

The legal status of these minority communities was established and placed under the protection of the international Lausanne Treaty (24/7/1923). Even though this treaty enabled the foundation of the Republic of Turkey, nevertheless the minority has experienced extensive violations of their human and religious rights during the period 1923-2003. The most severe violations were: (a) the mobilization to work battalions of 18-45 aged minority men in 1941, (b) the "welfare tax" of 1942-44 aiming the economic destruction of minorities, (c) the massive scale Pogrom of the 6-7 September 1955 in Istanbul especially against the religious institutions, (d) the forced deportation of member of Greek Community of Istanbul holding the Etablis status according to Lausanne Treaty. All these despite the fact the Republic of Turkey endorsed the European Convention of Human Rights as early as 1954. As a result of this policy, the aforementioned communities are presently living in a state of expatriation to a very large percentage (98%). The total population of the Greek Communities within Turkey being 135.000 in the year 1923 in total presently is approximately 3.000. Until three years ago the official position of Turkish state officials on the issue was that the members of the Greek Minority communities left their motherland because of "economic conditions" prevailing in Turkey at the time.

The last three years has seen a change of attitude by the Turkish authorities in their acceptance to negotiate with the Ecumenical Federation of Constantinopolitans as the federative body of the above mentioned expatriated community. Although some progress has been achieved towards alleviating the existing problems of the expatriated community of Greeks of Istanbul, much generous steps are needed to be taken before once can talk about remedy and reparations of the past gross violations. A significant part of these violations were directly or indirectly associated with the religious rights and freedoms. The Greek-Orthodox Community of Istanbul principally has a religious identity. This is because of historical reasons and essentially Istanbul being the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople which is the Center of the Eastern Orthodox Church having more than 300 Million believers all over the World.

The Patriarchate has been served the last two centuries by training each clergyman and staff at the Chalki Theological School at the island of Heybeliada near Istanbul. This School remains closed after the ruling of Turkish Ministry of Education in 1971. An irrelevant to the subject matter ruling of the Constitutional Court is used to close the School concerning the prohibition of "non-state universities". The School has been functioning since 1843 at the time of the Ottoman Empire and continued to function under the State supervision after the establishment of Republic of Turkey in 1923 till its closure 1971.

Another religious freedom issue facing the Greek Orthodox is the status of non-recognition of legal status of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople which leads to numerous problems of this 1700 years old and all world recognized and respected religious institution. Related to the issue of non-recognition of legal statute is the uncertainty of the ownership of 17 historical monasteries and their real estate properties which were placed by the government under the legal status being “abandoned-fused” and put under the supervision of the State, despite the fact that their use by the Greek-Orthodox Community is allowed.

Another serious religious freedom problem has been the continuing illegal occupation of three Orthodox churches and their properties in the district of Karakoy (Galata) by the descendants of the late Efthim Karahisaridis, who in 1924 established a self-declared “Turkish Orthodox Church” with the support of that time Turkish Government, against all the rules of Christian religion.

All the mentioned religious rights issues should be addressed by the implementation of the international standards on religious rights and freedoms.

Furthermore the competent authorities of the Government of Turkey must take urgent and firm measures against the nationalist and racist violence, taken into account the recent attacks to churches<sup>1</sup> in the area of Istanbul and the disclosure of an assassination plot against His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomeos I. It is a matter of high urgency the Ministry of Education of Republic of Turkey to introduce into school curricula the value of peaceful harmonious coexistence of various religious, cultural and ethnical origin communities as well as to eliminate the historically unfounded negative references against the non-Muslim communities from the textbooks which already has been declared by the Minister Mr. Nabi Avci recently.

Finally we strongly emphasize the need scientific aspects to prevail in the protection of world cultural heritage monuments, such as the cases of churches which later converted to mosques while during the 20<sup>th</sup> century after a major restoration by the Turkish authorities, changed use to museums. The re-conversion of these monuments<sup>2</sup> to mosques again, not only is against the scientific principles of monument preservation but also is not providing a positive contribution to interreligious and intercultural understanding and tolerance.

We urge the Chairperson-in-Office Personal Representative on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions to conduct a visit to Turkey so as to assess the situation on the ground, address the problems we have already enumerated in our intervention and make relevant recommendations to the Turkish Government.

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<sup>1</sup> On Sunday 27/4/2013 a group of youth attacked the Church of St. John in the island of Burgazada by breaking some furniture while the same day a Church of Hope at Atasehir was attacked by stones and eggs. In both cases security forces reacted immediately and take necessary measures.

<sup>2</sup> Haghia Sophia of Trabzon and the Monastery of Saint John at Stoudion in Istanbul (Imrahor Camii), while Haghia Sophia of Iznik has already been converted to a mosque.