

**Muslim Denomination in Bulgaria
(Grand Mufti's Office in the Republic of Bulgaria)**

Address: 27, Bratia Miladinovi str., 1301 Sofia/Bulgaria; tel: +359 2 9816001; fax: +359 2 9803058; web: www.genmuftibg.net

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Written statement to working session 11: *Freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief*

The disagreement and lack of cooperation on the part of statesmen, state and municipal employees for the legal construction of buildings necessary for Muslim community in the country

I would like to offer to your attention this report, which explains some of the most important and urgent demands of the Muslim minority. We consider the following cases, emphasizing that they are not the only ones which expect their favorable decision.

To our great regret, the constant practice has been established that every idea and intention of the Muslim confession in Bulgaria related to the development and the proper and complete functioning to be met with suspicion, disapproval, and sometimes even grows into accusations. Such is the case of the last few years which has been widely debated and criticized by statesmen, politicians, media and part of our public - namely our intention to build a Cultural Education and Administrative Centre in the Malinova dolina quarter in Sofia for the needs of the already existing for 20 years Higher Islamic Institute. With this statement I would like to express our concern and disappointment of the Muslim confession over such publications and rumours that could have a negative impact on the public and create serious tensions on ethnic and religious grounds. We have witnessed horrendous speeches and attacks by politicians and public figures in the media against the institution of the Muslim confession regarding the project in Sofia. It frequently happened to hear and read in reports with representatives of political parties to speak of "a five-storey mosque", "financing by terrorist organizations", etc.

The idea of building a Cultural Education and Administrative Centre arose at the beginning of democratic changes in the country when was the best felt need for institutions, forums or activities through which we can return the Muslim community to the bosom of Islam. Thus strengthening the influence and prestige of the institution Chief Mufti's Office and we will be more beneficial to the community and the country as a whole.

We strongly defend the position that the activity of the future complex is completely organized, coordinated and supervised by the the Chief Mufti's Office and the authorities concerned in our country.

The project proposas to construct an education building of the Higher Islamic Institute, which meets the requirements for accreditation by the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) and the Ministry of Education and Science (MES). I would like to add here that the Higher Islamic Institute in Sofia is in the process of preparing for institutional accreditation. One

of the requirements of the NEAA is that the educational institution has its own building and provides an opportunity for a normal educational process when applying for accreditation. There will be opportunity for research and studies for all wishing to familiarize themselves closely with the lifestyle, culture, beliefs and religious system of the Muslims in Bulgaria. The students, lecturers and research associates will progress precisely here, will defend their master's and doctoral theses, etc. The complex will serve for meetings on various occasions between representatives of different religions, guest lecturers from the country and abroad will be invited, not only Muslims but also Christians, Jews, sociologists, theologians, anthropologists and researchers in other fields to enrich our culture and knowledge of the other. In this connection we have a rather ambitious idea and it is to admit students from the Balkans and across Europe.

Thus, the students will not have to study Islamic theology in foreign parts.

Chief Mufti's Office and the Muslim community are making effort to gain accreditation for the Higher Islamic Institute for more than 10 years. There is more than one million Muslims in Bulgaria, and there are no department for Islamic studies in the Faculties of Theology of the Universities or other public schools.

However, many obstacles occurred since we intend the construction of the project. The problems are connected with the construction permit, changing the plans, documentation etc. Lastly, the Architects of Sofia turned out so busy long since, so there is no place for an appointment in their schedule in order to clarify details.

It is known that the only existing mosque in the capital is not enough to accommodate the flow of worshippers. It has a seating capacity of 500-600 people. However, on Fridays more than 700 worshippers enter the mosque and, depending on the season, around 250-300 people remain outside. The situation is most striking during both feasts Eid al-Adha ("Festival of Sacrifice", Qurban) and Eid ul-Fitr ("Festival of Breaking the Fast", Ramadan). Every time early in the morning about 2500-3000 Muslim men congregate and unsuccessfully try to hear the sermons, to pray and perform the prayer together with those who are inside for nearly 2 hours. On both Fridays and feast days those who want to join the general service are a lot more, but because of the fact that we fail to provide them with good conditions, they give up and blame us for inaction and irresponsibility. During the winter season or when the weather is very hot and sometimes rainy, visitors often return without having performed their prayers. The mosque is visited by ambassadors, representatives and employees of foreign diplomatic missions who often have to pray outside in the street and we cannot provide them with the necessary comfort and sufficient protection. I believe that these facts which can be checked every Friday are quite eloquent and should be considered whenever the topic for a second mosque is debated. The question: "What is the number of Muslims in Sofia?" is often posed. According to the data from the National Statistical Institute, they are 10 000.

The case with the construction of a new mosque in the city of Burgas is also alarming. The construction started few years ago but was subsequently stopped without any explicable and acceptable reasons. The municipality's motive was that the nationalist slogans and demands from part of the residents in the city must be respected. We did not receive an explanation of

where we can fulfil our religious obligations, given that there is no other mosque in the city since the last one was destroyed a long time ago.

Certain politicians are trying, and to an extent manage to cause fear, panic and hatred. They attempt to provoke a debate not to incriminate us in any irregularities, but only to acquire political dividends. They threaten us with all sorts of fabricated scenarios, and it occurs to nobody that if there was any threat, it would be manifested in some way during these 20 years. What has happened so far, so that we live in fear of the future? It is a pity that against the background of so many economic, financial, social, cultural and political issues they are dealing with the most trouble-free and accurate group - Muslims in Bulgaria.

I hope that so made exposition was useful to gain a clearer picture.

We expect the dialogue with the state and municipal bodies to be more effective and cooperative in order to clarify the obstacles for the legal construction of the necessary places.

We expect OSCE to observe the process and give opinion on the issues and proposals for development and decision.