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(Specifically selected topic): Freedom of religion or belief

Dear President,
Distinguished Representatives,
And esteemed NGO Delegates,

Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief states that the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief shall include, inter alia, the freedom to worship or assemble in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain places for these purposes. And, the participating States will establish and maintain freely accessible places of worship or assembly.

Although persons belonging to national minorities have the right to establish and maintain their own education, cultural and religious organizations or associations, the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace and of Rhodes and Kos islands still faces serious difficulties in construction or operation of mosques. The Turkish Minority does encounter restrictions in practicing their religion. For many years in Western Thrace, Muslim places of worship, mosques which were in need of repair could not be repaired because the authorities did not grant permits.

To bring into conformity with the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights, Greece restricted the competent authorities' discretion in granting an administrative authorization for the construction or the operation of places of worship to the formal conditions laid down by the applicable legislation. In connection with the right to build and use temples and places of worship, Article 27 of Law 3467/2006 abolished a legislative provision according to which the opinion (of a non-binding character) of the local Orthodox Bishop was to be sought for the issue of a permit to build and to operate a non-Orthodox place of worship. However, the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace has still difficulties when new mosques are built, particularly in respect of the height of minarets. The height of a minaret should not exceed the bell tower of churches, which is 7.5 meters. Only the principle to the effect that the local authorities responsible for urban planning should issue permits in such cases should be retained and implemented in the light of the non-discrimination principle in exercising the right to freedom of religion.

ABTTF would like to recall that all participating OSCE states have reiterated the importance of the commitment to freedom of religion or belief, also linking it to the promotion of tolerance and non-discrimination. However, the Turkish Minority in Western Thrace continues to be challenged by restrictions to their rights. This includes attacks or restrictions on places of worship.

On 2 September 2009, the mosque of Okçular village in Xanthi, Greece, was set on fire. Police officers, who inspected the crime scene, ascertained the occurrence as an incendiary action and stated that unidentified person or persons spoiled gasoline on the mosque carpets, after removing the iron railings and breaking a window to entry the mosque. Today, only seven Turkish families are living in the village of Okçular, which is located on the western border of Western Thrace, next to a Christian majority. During the general elections of 2004, the mosque was set on fire for the first time on 7th March and as a result completely burned down. The second incendiary action took place in 2007, and now on the day of the early election announcement of Greece for the 4th of October 2009, the mosque became a place of vandalism again.