

DELEGATION OF TURKEY

10 October 2006

**HUMAN DIMENSION IMPLEMENTATION MEETING
(Warsaw, 2-13 October 2006)**

**Working Session 13: Fundamental Freedoms II – Freedom of Thought,
Conscious, Religion or Belief**

STATEMENT

Mr. Moderator,

The Turkish Constitution firmly safeguards the fundamental rights and freedoms of all individuals, including freedom of religion or belief. In line with the OSCE commitments, the exercise of these rights may be subject only to such limitations as are provided by law and consistent with Turkey's obligations under international law.

In Turkey, discrimination on the premises of religion, language, race, creed, gender or ethnic origin is prohibited and punishable by law.

Within the framework of the ongoing reform process, there has been significant progress in improving the legislation concerning religious freedoms.

A new body, namely "Minority Issues Assessment Board" has been established by the Government in January 2004 for addressing the problems of non-Muslim minorities in Turkey.

Regular channels of dialogue with religious communities are in place and are operational.

Contrary to some statements made today, religious diversity continues to flourish in Turkey. The Association of Saint Paul Church and the Association of Saint Nicholas Church have been founded in Antalya with a view to establishing and sustaining places of worship. Saint Nicholas Church has started to hold religious services in November 2004.

Non-Muslim religious minority foundations have been legally granted the right to acquire and dispose of real property. All foundations in Turkey, including the non-Muslim community foundations are subject to the same legislation on property acquisition. Allegations regarding the expropriation of 30 properties belonging to the Patriarchate in Fener are baseless. We have no knowledge that the relevant Turkish authorities have ever received any complaints as such.

We appreciate the need for fresh cadres of Orthodox clergymen. The Turkish Government is looking into possible ways to overcome the legal difficulties for ensuring the reopening of the Theological School in Heybeliada within the limits of our Constitution and the secular education system prescribed by law.

Let me close by taking note of an unceasing endeavor to assign an ecumenical status and title to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul, an institution of the Republic of Turkey, pursuant to the relevant provisions of the Lausanne Peace Treaty.

The Patriarchate has been exercising its functions without facing any impediment and discrimination under the safeguards of the secular and democratic character of the Turkish Republic.

The presence of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul for centuries is a testimony to the long tradition of tolerance and harmonious co-existence in Turkey.

Thank you.