

**ORDER OF ST. ANDREW THE APOSTLE
ARCHONS OF THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE**

For Interpreter Only:

Working Session 2: Freedom of Religion or Belief

10:00 AM, 29 September, 2009

Subject: Religious Freedom for the Ecumenical Patriarchate

Presenter: Theofanis Economidis (Order of St. Andrew The Apostle)

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen:

We are here on behalf of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in order to highlight its important rights and prerogatives and the serious impediments and threats that this 2000-year old religious institution is facing on a daily basis: We are doing this mindful of current Turkish aspirations to join the European Union and of certain encouraging recent events.

1. The Turkish government does not recognize the “Ecumenical” status of the Patriarch and Patriarchate:

The term or title “Ecumenical” has been used since the 6th century A.D. and is recognized and used universally throughout the world. Officials of the Turkish Republic must understand that the Ecumenical Patriarch is the spiritual leader of 300 million Orthodox Christians in the world and not just the Bishop of a local congregation, as the Turkish Government contends.

2. The Ecumenical Patriarchate currently has no legal identity or *bona fide* personality in Turkey:

The Turkish authorities do not allow the Ecumenical Patriarchate to own property, not even its churches. It is absolutely imperative that the Patriarchate be afforded legal standing, so that it can appear in court and defend itself when its property is illegally confiscated.

3. The Turkish government interferes in Patriarchal Elections:

The Ecumenical Patriarch, and Hierarchs who elect him, must be Turkish citizens at the time of the election. In fact, the government arbitrarily reserves to itself veto power for any candidate for the position of Ecumenical Patriarch. If this veto right practice continues, it may lead in the eventual closure of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Ecumenical Patriarchate should be permitted to elect freely and without interference future Patriarchs who are not necessarily Turkish citizens at the time of their election.

4. The Ecumenical Patriarchate is unable to train new clergy in Turkey because its Theological School of Halki was forcibly closed down by the Turkish Government in 1971.

Severe visa restrictions on priests and students who wish to visit the Patriarchate in order to study and serve there, coupled with the school's closure have deprived this religious institution of the ability to train its clergy and lay theologians. The Ecumenical Patriarchate should be allowed to reopen its Seminary at Halki otherwise its future will be seriously imperiled.

5. The Turkish government has confiscated thousands of properties from the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

In 1936, the Church owned more than 8,000 properties but, by 1999, the number was down to about 2,000 and today, the number is less than 400. These Properties, including monasteries, church buildings, schools, and land, should be returned or arrangements made for appropriate restitution.

6. Decades of harassment and seizure of property have resulted in the reduction of the local Orthodox population to less than 3000.

Although the Patriarch is indeed Ecumenical, he needs to rely, to a great extent, on the support of local churches and metropolises. The massive seizure of properties and the drastic diminution of the local Greek population have deprived the Patriarchate of the necessary resources for its normal function.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Having stated these unacceptable violations of religious and legal rights, we are encouraged by recent events, most notably by the visit of Prime Minister Erdogan, together with the Ecumenical Patriarch, to the Orphanage of Buyukada. This visit was an indirect, if not explicit, acknowledgement of ownership rights of the Ecumenical Patriarchate over the Orphanage and a tacit acceptance of the verdict of ECHR on the issue. The Turkish Prime minister was quoted as saying:

“Persians have a saying: “They gathered, talked and dispersed. We should not be of those who gather, talk and disperse. A result should come out of this.”

We hope that the Turkish PM meant what he said and he will:

1. Officially allow the use of the title” Ecumenical;”
2. Stop interfering in Patriarchal Elections;
3. Return to the Ecumenical Patriarchate the Orphanage of Buyukada and all illegally confiscated properties;” and
4. Reopen the Theological School of Halki.

The nations comprising OSCE, of which Turkey is a member, must demand of the Turkish Republic that religious discrimination against the Ecumenical Patriarchate, at all levels, must cease and the consequences of past discrimination must be rectified.

Thank you for your attention.