

Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

WORKING SESSION 12

Fundamental Freedoms I, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief

As delivered by

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Mr. Moderator,

Freedom of religion is the only human right and fundamental freedom which is directly referred in the principles of Helsinki Final Act. Its respect cannot be conditional or relative but absolute.

Freedom of religion is not a negotiable right and interfaith dialogue should not be seen as its substitute or even worse as a window dressing exercise in the countries with dire record of intolerance.

A year ago, my Delegation brought to the attention of this distinguished gathering the issue of protection of Christian as well as other religious minorities in the immediate OSCE neighbourhood, in Syria and Iraq, which are facing existential threats. Since then, the genocidal nature of the actions of ISIL, Al Nusra Front and other terrorist organizations, affiliated with Al-Qaeda, was widely acknowledged by the international community.

The Delegation of Armenia would like to underline the need to streamline countering religious extremism and radicalization in the OSCE region in its activities with the aim to ensure freedom of religion or belief in the territory of the OSCE participating States and their neighbourhood.

OSCE has an important role to play in protection of religious minorities in Syria, in particular by focusing on hate crimes, exclusion, marginalisation and denial of past crimes. Our institutions need to be more active to this end.

Another pressing issue, we would like to touch upon is violation of the freedom of religion and belief in the name of countering terrorism. Religious minorities in some OSCE participating States are facing serious curbing of their rights and freedoms, including expropriation of religious property.

We would like to raise a specific case of attempted expropriation by the state authorities of the Armenian Church St Giragos and its land property in Diyarbekir city. St. Giragos is the biggest Armenian medieval church in the Middle East that goes back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century and represents both religious and cultural heritage of Armenians. The Church was restored by the Armenian community with private donations of Armenians from all over the world and became symbol of reclaiming Armenian identity for many residents of Diyarbekir and Sur which was densely populated by the Armenians a century ago. On many occasions the Turkish authorities expressed the readiness to return to religious groups their religious property which was expropriated decades ago and accepted the relevant

recommendations put forward by Armenia in the framework of the Universal Periodical Review of the UN Human Rights Council. Yet this recent development goes in completely reverse direction and it constitutes violation of freedom of religion commitments.

The decree of «emergency expropriation» appeared in March 25 issue of the Official Gazette of the Republic of Turkey (T.C. Resmi Gazete) which enlisted St Giragos Church among other expropriated Christian places of worship and religious properties.

According to reports St Giragos Church foundation appealed to Turkish court to revoke the decision on «emergency expropriation» with regard to the St Giragos church and its property which entails more than dozen sites in Sur district of Diyarbakir.

The appeal challenges the legality of the expropriation on the ground of domestic legislation and international obligations particularly treaty of Lausanne by which Turkey agreed to grant full protection to the churches and the religious property of non Moslem minorities.

We would also like to refer to the OSCE commitments particularly Kiev decision on the freedom of religion and belief which refers to the return of religious property not its expropriation.

We raised this issue at the level of the Permanent Council several months ago. Turkish delegation pledged to response at the ASRC meeting but so far no any information was provided. We hope that Turkish delegate already has instructions from the capital on this issue.

We hope that St Giragos church will be returned to the Armenian community along with its all real estate properties.

To this end, we would encourage Turkish authorities to reconsider unilateral decision and actions and enter into meaningful dialogue with the relevant representatives of the Armenian community.

Thank you.