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COMBATING HATE CRIMES IN WESTERN THRACE

Mr/Ms Moderator,
Thank you very much for the floor.

My name is Pervin Chairoula, and I am representing The Turkish Minority of Western Thrace in Greece.

Introduction

In all nation states, the points of view of dominant cultures to people with different ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds are mainly based on discrimination.

In today's Europe, more than 300 million people with different ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds are obliged to live together. However, discrimination based on religion and belief, ethnic identity and different culture seems to be more of a threat rather than strength. And the perception of "others", "unknown" may cause emotional and psychological distress and create tension if there is no reliable legislation.

It is worth to note that communities and minorities who live for centuries in the Balkans differ from the other minorities living across Europe. While most people with different ethnic religious and linguistic background living in north Europe are immigrants, people belonging to national, ethnic or religious and linguistic minorities in the Balkans are indigenous populations.

In the Balkans, especially the Muslim communities use ethnicity and religion as an inseparable single identity. In many Balkan countries, the perception of Turkish Minority is also a Muslim Minority and vice versa. Therefore, persons belonging to these minorities are often subject to hate crimes.

The common concept of hate crimes is based on the hatred towards the "other" or towards the fear of "otherness" or "intolerance".

Hate Crimes in Western Thrace

Western Thrace is a region that extends on an area of 8578 square kilometers in the northeast part of Greece. It consists of three provinces: Ksanthi, Rodopi and Evros.

Today, an estimated number of 150.000 ethnic Turks live in Western Thrace. Members of the Muslim Turkish Minority who have been living in this region for centuries identify themselves as ethnic Turks.

In recent years the situation of the Turkish Muslim Minority has relatively improved. But there has not been progress in the field of established minority rights. Greece alleges that “equality among citizens” policy provides sufficient reforms and continues to ignore its obligations regarding the rights of the Turkish Muslim Minority by violating the bilateral and international treaty obligations to which is a party. Denial of the Turkish identity, occupation of the Charitable Foundations and practice of the state appointed muftis instead of the elected muftis continue unabated. More than 60.000 people still suffer from the deprivation of the article 19 of the citizenship law and the situation of minority education continues to be as miserable as ever, the level of education in mother tongue decreases day by day. And somehow the violent attacks still continue.

As a natural result of oppressive and discriminative assimilation policies of the Greek State and the provocative nature of the majority media, the members of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace have long suffered as victims of hate crimes in Greece.

Since the early years of 19th century the existence of the Turkish minority has been one of the most important issues of the Greek state. The historical relations between Greeks and Turks affected the existence of Turkish Minority within the Greek territory.

The perception of the Turkish minority has been changed due to the changing relations of Greece and Turkey. Starting from the Peace Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 till 1950s the Lausanne spirit dominated the relations. However, from 1950's onwards, the situation of the Minority started to get worse day by day. Especially during the Military Junta Regime, in the second part of 1960s, hate crimes, human and minority rights violations reached the highest level. These unlawful and unacceptable practices continued till 1990s.

In 1990, one of the extreme examples of hate crimes occurred in Western Thrace. On 29 January 1990 after the trial of Sadik Ahmet and Ibrahim Serif a religious ceremony organized for the anniversary of 29 January 1988 protest. But, a number of Greek people decided to protest this ceremony, then before the ceremony the violent attack to Turks started. Muslim Turks were beaten, around 30 people were injured and many shops belonging to Turks were damaged. On that day, it was not a coincidence that no Greek shop was damaged. According to the article “Hellenism” quoted in a book published in Istanbul *“The Greek shops were labeled as the Nazis labeled the shops belonging to the Jews. The difference was that in Western Thrace the labeled shops represented the ones that should not be damaged.”* After these events the governmental officials declared that the loss of shopkeepers would be compensated. However, up to now none of them were given compensation.

In 2001 (11 January) a Greek Orthodox woman broke into the local mosque in the “Alitcilar” Alkioni village in Xanthi. The woman damaged many pictures and Islamic figures in the mosque and was arrested by the police while she was about to broke up a fire. There was no announcement after the arrestment.

In 2001 (2 January) in a village of Evros region a Turkish graveyard was attacked and many graves were damaged. One of the graves was approximately 300 years old.

There may be different reasons for the Greek authorities to deny the ethnic identity of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace. But, one of the main reasons can be the security of Greece. As Meinardus stated *“The great majority of Greeks see the minority issue mainly as an issue of*

national security... they fear this area may one day become a second Cyprus, subject to invasion, and possible annexation, by Turkey.”

Article 19 of the Greek Citizenship Law (No: 3370 of 1955) was an obvious case of racial discrimination and a flagrant violation of the fundamental right to citizenship. It was in breach of the Greek constitution and international law. It provided that: “A citizen of non-Greek origin leaving Greece without the intention of returning may be declared having lost Greek citizenship.” On 23 January 1998, Article 19 of the Greek Citizenship was repealed by the Greek Parliament. This act was welcomed both by the international community, as well as within the ranks of the Turkish minority. However abolishment did not include a retroactive effect. The Minister of Interior on April 2005 announced that the number of Muslim Turks deprived from the Greek citizenship until 1998 was 46.638, which is actually around 60.000.

So far, no steps have been taken in order to reinstate thousands of unlawfully expelled citizens and their children who continue living abroad.

If the case of the victims of article 19 is not an example of hate crime, then it is definitely a good example of an “ethnic cleansing” attempt.

Recently, in the second half of 2008 in Xanthi within the borders of Vistonida Municipality in Tekton village some graves in the Turkish graveyard were damaged by Municipality authorities in order to open a road. Pictures of this practice are available in the written documents that will be circulated shortly.

Last month the Mosque in village Toxotes in Xanthi region was attacked for the third time and this indicates that the Muslim Turkish Minority still has problems on that issue.

Hate Speech in Media

In Greece, the media plays an effective role among the governments / public opinion and minorities. Also, it plays an important role in shaping the public opinion that the authorities generally take into account.

Until recently, the media exercised its role with a constructive manner to enhance conflicts, especially in Western Thrace. Although after 90's, with the improvement of Turkish-Greek relations the influence of the media turned into a positive attitude towards the minority, some local and national Greek newspapers like “Hronos”, “Stohos”, “Antifonitis” and “Eleftheri Thraki” still continue their strong nationalistic discourses that strengthen “the other” as anti-self.

The Turkish-Muslim Minority in Western Thrace has suffered from the discriminatory applications of the Greek authorities and their refusal to recognize the minority's self-identification.

The aforementioned newspapers reject to use minority's identity as “Turkish”. They promote “Muslim” identity instead.

In some of the examples of the Greek Media, Turkish Minority is reflected as “the other” and is alleged to endanger the national Greek identity.

The construction of the Greek identity is influenced by “the other” who is a threatening image to the nation's independence. (Because Turkish Minority has a kin-state, Turkey, neighbouring to Greece).

The history and the basic characteristics of the Greek-Turkish conflict and stereotypes play a key role in the Greek Media's attitude towards the Turkish Minority. Greek Media promote the fear

of “the other” by emphasizing differences between the minority and the majority.

The journalists of Hronos, Stohos, Antifonitis, and Eleftheri Thraki generally use degrading phrases that constitute hatred or prejudice against the Turkish minority. As a result of this targeting practice, the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace is often subject to threats and misdemeanour in the midst of a conditioned society.

Some examples of these degrading and targeting media speech are also available on the written documents.

CONCLUSION

As can be seen from the above examples, the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace is targeted on purpose specifically due to its ethnic origin and is constantly subject to hate crimes as a result of the unjustifiable and discriminative policies of the Greek Administration as well as the provocative and degrading context of the Greek Media.

The Turkish Minority of Western Thrace has under no circumstances confronted the Greek State, nor ever rebelled against it. Quite on the contrary, the members of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace have always been law abiding exemplary citizens.

It is outrageous that the Greek Administration and the media perceive the Minority as a threat against national security.

Therefore, the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace calls upon the international community to urge Greece to end all oppressive and discriminative practices targeting the minority immediately and implement an objective and satisfactory legislation in order to prevent hate crimes as well as to take all necessary precautions to better police and prosecute these crimes.

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