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Statement at the OSCE/ODIHR HDIM 2015 in Warsaw

HRWF (06.10.2015) - At Session 14 of the OSCE/ODIHR HDIM devoted to "Tolerance and non-discrimination II, including: – Combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, also focusing on intolerance and discrimination against Christians and members of other religions– Combating anti-Semitism – Combating intolerance and discrimination against Muslims", three NGOs highlighted a number of serious issues concerning freedom of religion or belief in Turkey.

CSW (30.09.2015) - <http://www.osce.org/odihr/189461?download=true> - Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Forum 18 and the Norwegian Helsinki Committee raise the importance of using a common, human rights based approach to Freedom of Religion or Belief in the OSCE's work and in the work of participating states across the OSCE region.

The EU's 2013 *Guidelines on the promotion and protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief* are a good example of the progress that is being made in advancing such an approach. These guidelines commit the EU and its Member States' to act both internally and externally to protect and promote this human right. On matters internal to EU Member States, Christian Solidarity Worldwide welcomes the European Commission's public consultation on *Tolerance and respect: preventing and combating antisemitic and anti-Muslim hatred in Europe* and we contributed a written submission to this process. We recommend that this process remains firmly embedded in the framework of the human rights based approach of the EU guidelines, which is one of freedom of religion or belief for all people, everywhere. The upcoming review of the EU Guidelines should also bring welcome reflection on how the EU can better ensure the implementation of the guidelines across all EU overseas delegations to counter freedom of religion or belief violations against all individuals and to promote positive peace.

There still remain significant challenges in the area of freedom of religion or belief across the OSCE as Forum 18 and the Norwegian Helsinki Committee address in their statements.

Looking at Turkey, the erosion of the state's constitutionally guaranteed secular impartiality by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) is of concern for vulnerable groups and people, both religious and non-religious, who face state discrimination and social hostilities.

In Turkey's recent United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR), several OSCE participating states represented here today raised the situation of the 20 million Turkish Alevis, whose houses of worship, cemevis, are not legally recognised by the government. Others, such as France, called upon Turkey to 'Put an end to mandatory religion courses for the "Alevis"'. This is not the first time that these issues have been raised and we urge

Turkey to act to resolve them. Additionally, reports of attacks on Alevi homes and properties continue, often with impunity for perpetrators.

Christians in Turkey face the non-restitution of seized property; they do not receive permits to build churches, nor are they able to train their clergy. Converts from Islam can face delay and harassment when changing their religion on ID cards. Justice remains elusive; for example, for the families of the three Protestant Christians murdered in Malatya in 2007 or following the recent attack by policemen on St. Giragos Armenian Catholic Church in Diyarbakir on 7 September 2015.

The Jewish population has generally been able to worship freely and has received government protection. The government spent 2.5 million USD to restore the Great Synagogue and participated in the UN's Holocaust Day for the first time earlier this year. Despite this, social hostility to Jews is widespread and sometimes encouraged by inflammatory rhetoric by government officials. Responding to an anti-Semitic tweet by a Turkish singer in 2014 that said: "*God Bless Hitler*", the Mayor of Ankara responded: "*I applaud you*". Such sentiments are not isolated, extending into the media; this 'hate speech' must be addressed before it causes greater social harm as Dr Yildrem from the Norwegian Helsinki Committee will address.

The Kurds, an ethnic minority, also continue to face hostility and direct government attacks, resulting in casualties on both sides; the state's use of violence has also fuelled social hostilities, which include a spate of violent attacks by Turkish nationalists on ordinary Kurdish citizens. Last month, three Kurdish civilians, including a 13 year-old girl -were killed in the town of Cizre.

Recommendations:

CSW urges Turkey to:

1. Ensure that all religion or belief groups and their institutions can obtain legal personality and exercise their internationally established rights;
2. Effectively prosecute those who attack places of worship or individuals due to their religion or belief and provide the victims of rights violations with reparations;
3. Educate all public officials, including those charged with law enforcement in their duty to protect the rights of religious minorities in a manner consistent with the international human rights framework on freedom of religion or belief;
4. Monitor the implementation of the decree returning confiscated properties to minority communities, to ensure that the General Foundations Board of Turkey processes each application for return of assets quickly and fairly;
5. Remove the box denoting religion on ID cards in line with the ECtHR's 2010 decision in *Sinan Işık v. Turkey* in order to avoid further breaches of Article 9 of the ECHR.
6. Ensure the implementation of recommendations made in the 2015 UN UPR, especially those pertaining to Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Expression;
7. Ratify the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities;
8. Remove all reservations to international human rights treaties and uphold the rights outlined in the international statutes to which it is party; including withdrawing its reservations to article 27 of the ICCPR on minority rights, which limits the rights afforded to religious minorities;

CSW recommends that OSCE participating states:

9. CSW further calls on OSCE participating States and institutions to encourage and assist the Turkish authorities in promoting freedom of religion or belief in accordance with the accepted international human rights standards on freedom of religion or belief.
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Assyrians call on Turkey's President to recognize Armenian genocide

AINA (26.04.2015) - An open letter addressed to Turkish president Erdogan, and signed by 22 Assyrian, Kurdish and Turkish organizations, calls on the president to recognize the genocide of Assyrians, Armenians and Greeks which occurred during World War One.

See [Assyrian Genocide 100](#) for more on the genocide.

The letter says "In a democracy, to establish harmony in society and to heal past wounds, making peace with the past and accepting the truth is an expected behavior -- no matter how painful" and "We, the undersigned are hereby demanding an end to the Turkish government's adamant denial of the 1915 Genocide in the regions ruled under the Ottoman Empire and formerly called Anatolia and Mesopotamia. We demand the recognition of the 1915 Genocide and the restitution of the rights of its survivors.

Here is the full text of the letter:

The political movement in the Ottoman Empire called Ittihat ve Terraki Cemiyeti (the Committee of Union and Progress), with the help of some Kurdish forces, committed the premeditated, systematic and deliberate murder of the Christian population living in what was known as the Anatolia and Mesopotamia. Between 1915 and 1923, one and half million Armenians, over 500,000 Assyrians and over 350,000 Greeks were killed in the first genocide of the 20th century. Children and women, young and old, were ruthlessly slaughtered. The perpetrators of these heinous crimes forcibly occupied the victims' properties and land. The 1915 Genocide was a well-executed plan to take possession of these land areas.

In a democracy, to establish harmony in society and to heal past wounds, making peace with the past and accepting the truth is an expected behavior -- no matter how painful. Justice and human values should always take precedence over Politics. Instead, the Turkish government has chosen to deny and hide the truth about the 1915 Genocide and continues to defend the perpetrators.

One hundred years later Turkey's stance on the Genocide leaves the wounds of the past open, passing down generations of the Armenians, Assyrians and Pontic Greeks. The Turkish government's politics of denial are the main cause behind this country's full development into a truly enlightened and democratic country.

The people of Anatolia and Mesopotamia, in the last hundred years, have endured so much death and suffering. The worse of these was undoubtedly the Genocide that ended in the loss of millions of Armenians, Assyrians and Pontic Greeks. Millions more were expelled from their ancestral lands. These displaced populations risk extinction of their culture entirely due to the Genocide of a hundred year ago. Therefore, it is imperative that the Turkish government would guarantee the safety of these ethnicities within its borders.

No single country should bear the heavy burden of genocide, yet to lessen this burden and to prevent new genocides from occurring in Anatolia, the Turkish government and the descendants of the perpetrators must express regret for the crimes committed against their Christian citizens and their relatives in the last century. The rights of the survivors of the Genocide must be recognized and their plights remedied. The government in Ankara must also open the Ottoman Archives for research and public inquiry.A

We, the undersigned are hereby demanding an end to the Turkish government's adamant denial of the 1915 Genocide in the regions ruled under the Ottoman Empire and formerly called Anatolia and Mesopotamia. We demand the recognition of the 1915 Genocide and the restitution of the rights of its survivors.

- Assyrian Genocide Research Center (Seyfo)
- Assyrian Youth Association in Sweden (AUF)
- Assyrian Women's Association in Sweden (AKF)
- Armenian Associations in Sweden
- Pontiac Greeks Unions Association in Sweden
- Assyrian Association of Europe (ZAVD)
- Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO)
- Mezopotamiens Organization in the US
- St. James Syrian Orthodox Cathedral in St. James
- Alevi Federation of Sweden
- Swedish-Turkish Solidarity Association in Stockholm
- Mezopotamiens People's Congress
- EuroKurd - Center for Human Rights
- Mezopotamiens Democratic Change Party (MDDP)
- Meopotamiens solidarity Association
- Kurdish Council in Sweden
- Kurdish Institute in Stockholm
- Kurdish Institute in Brussels
- Syrian Orthodox Church in Hallonbergen
- Nsibin Publishers
- Assyrian Youth district in Stockholm
- Assyrian Association of cultur in Botkyrka

Turkey unveils Great Synagogue as Jewish population fades

Reuters (25.03.2015) <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/25/us-turkey-jews-idUSKBN0ML1LH20150325> -When the domes of Edirne's abandoned Great Synagogue caved in, Rifat Mitrani, the town's last Jew, knew it spelled the end of nearly two millennia of Jewish heritage in this Turkish town.

As a boy, Mitrani studied Hebrew in the synagogue's gardens and, in the 1970s, dispatched its Torah to Istanbul after the community shrank to just three families. In 1975, he unlocked its doors and swept away the cobwebs to marry his wife Sara.

"Only I am left. It happens slowly, becoming the last one," said Mitrani, 65, whose family fled here more than 500 years ago.

Now a five-year, \$2.5 million government project has restored the synagogue's lead-clad domes and resplendent interior ahead of its Thursday re-opening, the first temple to open in Turkey in two generations, but one without worshippers.

It is part of a relaxation of curbs on religious minorities ushered in during President Tayyip Erdogan's 12 years in power.

Yet it coincides with a spike in anti-Semitism in predominantly Muslim Turkey and a wave of Jews moving away, say members of the aging community, which has shrunk by more than a third in the last quarter century.

The increase, observers say, is linked to anti-Israel sentiment which reached a crescendo during Israel's Gaza offensive in July. Erdogan compared Israel's assault on Palestinians to "genocide" and "Hitler's barbarism."

He drew distinctions between Israel and Turkish Jews, yet his words helped stoke outrage, and local Jews were threatened by public figures and pro-government newspapers.

Turkey's Jews, most of whose ancestors sought refuge here from the Spanish Inquisition, are on edge. Their school and synagogues are behind security tunnels, shielded by steel blast protection.

"They have lived in a state of fear for a long time after terror attacks and the feeling that they are not treated as Turkish citizens. There is worry for the younger generation," said Ohad Kaynar, Israel's deputy consul general.

Louis Fishman, an expert on Turkish affairs at Brooklyn College in New York, saw evidence of government indifference to anti-Semitism. "Buildings might be protected but the people who visit them are subjected to regular hate speech and threats," he said.

Erdogan's spokesmen and other officials did not respond to requests for comment for this article. However, the Turkish government has been at pains to distinguish between its Israel policy and its attitude towards Turkey's Jewish population.

Close allies under previous governments, Israeli-Turkish ties hit a nadir in 2010 when Israeli commandoes stormed a Turkish-led convoy of ships carrying aid to Gaza and killed 10 Turks. Turkey withdrew its ambassador and ejected Israel's.

"Regardless of the fact that we identify ourselves as Turks, we are still perceived as foreigners. Tensions between Turkey and Israel directly impact us," said Karel Valansi, a political columnist with Salom newspaper.

For centuries, Ottoman lands were a haven for Jews, welcoming Sephardim expelled in 1492 by Spain.

Once here, they adopted new rituals, such as the melody of the azan in their prayers, while maintaining their traditions, most prominently the Judeo-Spanish dialect called Ladino.

Census data shows Ladino was the mother tongue for 84 percent of Turkish Jews in 1927 before nationalist campaigns stamped it out. Today only a few elderly speak the archaic form of Castilian Spanish, one of the world's endangered tongues.

A "wealth tax" in the 1940s, emigration to Israel after 1947 and decades of political instability conspired to decimate a population that was 150,000 before World War One.

Spain and Portugal are redressing historical wrongs by offering citizenship, bound to prompt some to pull up stakes.

"Jews have long left for economic reasons. What is different now is a factor for young people is the pressure they feel because they're Jewish," said Mois Gabay, 31, who writes

for Salom. He cited figures showing one in four Jewish high-school graduates opted to study overseas in 2014, doubling in one year.

But the decline is mainly due to a death rate that exceeds births threefold, said Naim Guleryuz, the Jewish museum curator.

At Istanbul's main Neve Salom synagogue, vandals in November hung a fake demolition notice close to the anniversary of a string of 2003 car bombings claimed by al Qaeda that targeted Jewish temples and British interests, killing 57 people.

Even the opening of the Edirne synagogue was at risk. The governor said it would be a museum instead and that he felt "hatred" after Israeli police entered al Aqsa mosque in November. He later apologized, and restoration work continued.

"This is not only Jewish but a part of Turkish and world heritage. It is proof that we have lived together and still do," said Guleryuz, author of a book on Edirne's Jews. "If we occasionally celebrate a wedding, we can keep it alive."

The synagogue's bright yellow exterior is a burst of light among the dilapidated wooden houses and concrete apartment blocks in Edirne's former Jewish quarter. Inside, painters painstakingly decorated the ceiling with thousands of stars, as beams of sunlight passed through a colonnade of neat arches.

"It looks like its old self," said Mitrani, standing beside the polished marble of the ark bearing the Ten Commandments.

Once the Balkans' largest Jewish temple, the Great Synagogue opened on the sultan's decree in 1909 to serve some 20,000 Jews. It was modeled on a temple in Vienna, later destroyed by the Nazis.

Thousands of Jews left Edirne, situated near the Greek and Bulgarian borders, in 1934 when a racist mob attacked their property, but Mitrani's father, a grocer, rebuilt his shop.

Mitrani, who owns two supermarkets here, travels to Istanbul each week to join his wife and daughters for the Sabbath.

He planted a pine tree next to his mother's grave in the old cemetery, part of which has been occupied by a housing complex that uprooted graves. Litter is strewn among hundreds of broken headstones, which include the odd Greek Orthodox inscription.

"I would have liked to have been buried in Edirne, next to my mother," Mitrani said. "Staying was always the easiest thing for me. I can't imagine the day I won't be here."

Accused perpetrators released in Malatya murder trial

WWM (22.01.2015) - A Turkish criminal court has released two former military officers and an Islamic university researcher who had been jailed for nearly four years on suspected involvement in the 2007 murders of three Christians in southeast Turkey.

At the 101st hearing of the case Jan. 21, the Malatya First High Criminal Court ruled that the three men – Ret. Col. Mehmet Ulger, Maj. Haydar Yesil and Ruhi Abat -- be set free pending the conclusion of the trial.

"This is a huge shame, that leaves us without much hope," said Protestant church leader Umut Sahin, who was present when the court's ruling was announced. "Unfortunately, we expect the case will drag on now for at least another year."

"We were not at all surprised," plaintiff lawyer Erdal Dogan told World Watch Monitor shortly after the panel of three judges and two prosecutors announced its decision.

He noted that political manipulation had changed the direction of the case over the past 12 months. Together with Ret. Gen. Hursit Tolon, the accused mastermind of the murders who was set free last June, the newly released suspects now claim the deadly plot was orchestrated by the government's former-ally-turned-nemesis, the Hizmet movement led by Muslim scholar Fetullah Gulen.

The day before the Malatya hearing, Gulen's lawyer, Nuruallah Albayrak, issued a statement accusing the Turkish government of "trying to heap unsolved murders" on Gulen and his movement, which President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has labeled an illegal "parallel" conspiracy trying to overthrow the ruling Justice and Development Party.

On the witness stand Wednesday, defendant Abat testified that the accusations against him were "disinformation" devised by the parallel state, stressing, "I am with President Erdogan to the end, and I will always support him." Met by his family and local journalists as he left the prison that evening with his fellow defendants, Abat declared that they had been arrested "in a dirty plot."

With Wednesday's release of Ulger, Yesil and Abat, all but one of 20 of the men jailed in March 2011 on charges of planning the Malatya killings are now released on probation. By court order, they are banned from leaving the country until the completion of the trial. The last of the 20 is jailed in another city on a separate case.

Life sentences without parole have been demanded for the five men accused of carrying out the plot. They were released under house arrest in March 2014 and fitted with tracking devices.

The drawn-out Malatya trial has now spanned more than seven years, with the 8th anniversary of the brutal stabbing deaths of Turkish Christians Necati Aydin and Ugur Yuksel and German Tilmann Geske to be commemorated on April 18.

Hearings are scheduled to resume in the trial on Feb. 18.

Turkey approves construction of first new church in nearly a century

The Huffington Post (05.01.2015) - Turkey is getting a brand new church for the first time in nearly a century.

The \$1.5 million Virgin Mary Syriac church will be built in the Istanbul suburb of Yesilkoy, Daily Sabah reports.

A government source told the AFP that this is the first church that the government has allowed Christians to build from the ground up since the republic formed in 1923, though other churches have been restored and reopened. Yesilkoy already has a Greek Orthodox, Armenian and Catholic church.

The construction project will be funded by the Syriac community. The Syriac Orthodox Church is considered to be one of the oldest Christian denominations. Part of the church's liturgy is said in an ancient Aramaic dialect believed to be closely related to the language spoken by Christ. Syrian Orthodox churches can be found all over the world.

There are now only 25,000 Syrian Christians in Turkey, according to The Daily Sabah.

Turkey is officially a secular country, but about 99 percent of its 76 million residents are Muslims. Less than 100,000 are Christian.

The country's Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu met with the country's religious leaders on Friday. He insisted that the ruling AKP party "does not discriminate between our citizens" and that "the principle of equal citizenship continues to be our characteristic trait."

Turkey has in fact become a refuge for Christians fleeing persecution by the Islamic State in nearby Syria and Iraq, Reuters reports.

But secular critics of the AKP have accused President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of trying to strengthen Islam's influence -- particularly through changes to religious education in schools.
