

Human Rights Without Frontiers calls upon Greece to guarantee the rights of its ethnic Turks, a Muslim minority

HRWF (09.01.2014) - **Human Rights Without Frontiers**, a Brussels-based NGO, is calling upon Greece, the new chair of the European Union, to guarantee the rights of the ethnic Turks, a Muslim minority, in five areas: the right to self-identification, freedom of association, freedom of expression and of the minority media, freedom of education, freedom of religion as well as the appointment of muftis and imams. This is based on a fact-finding mission carried out by HRWF, in Thrace (north-eastern part of Greece) in October 2012 to investigate a number of violations of human rights concerning Muslim ethnic Turks protected by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne (Report can be viewed at www.hrwf.org).

Concerning the right to self-identification

Human Rights Without Frontiers urges the Greek authorities to respect the right to self-identification of the persons belonging to the minority, which is protected by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, and to discontinue the sterile debate about how to name the group but instead to prioritize the safeguarding of the individual and collective human rights of its members as it was requested at Greece's UN Universal Periodical Review in 2011.

Concerning the freedom of association

Human Rights Without Frontiers strongly recommends to Greece

- to implement three rulings of the European Court of Human Rights which condemned the closure of several associations because they identified themselves as "Turkish";
- to allow the registration of associations under the names chosen by their founding members, including whether they contain the name of an ethnic group or the word "minority";
- to amend the Code of Civil Procedures in such a way that it allows the implementation of the European Court decisions in matters related to freedom of association.

Concerning the freedom of expression and of the media

Turkish-language newspapers and radio stations have been subjected to draconian measures, including the imposition of unreasonable conditions for registration, excessive fines, the misuse of defamation laws and other actions to silence the Turkish-language media.

In this regard, **Human Rights Without Frontiers** urges the Greek authorities

- to respect the freedom of the media of the Turkish-speaking minority in order to protect the diversity of opinions;
- to only prosecute serious cases of alleged defamation;
- to uphold the principle of fair and proportionate punishment in the judicial process;
- to respect the letter and the spirit of the Treaty of Lisbon along with all other European covenants and declarations while implementing Article 14 of the Constitution of the Hellenic Republic on freedom of expression and the press.

Concerning school education for minority children

Under the Treaty of Lausanne, the right of the ethnic Turkish minority to establish schools was guaranteed, including "the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein." However, several policies of the Greek government have made the realisation of these provisions highly problematic. Limited access to adequate Turkish-language educational resources, including curriculum, textbooks and teachers, are also noteworthy.

In this regard, **Human Rights Without Frontiers** urges the Greek authorities

- to revise a number of policies concerning the minority primary and secondary schools: their number and location, the training and hiring of teachers, the curriculum and textbooks to be used;
- to extend the bilingual (Turkish-Greek) primary school system to the Greek-language kindergartens exclusively attended by children of the Turkish ethnic minority.

Concerning the freedom of religion and the appointment of Muftis

Christians and Jews have the right to elect their religious leaders but Muslims of Thrace have not had this possibility because for more than 20 years Greece has been applying a discriminatory policy towards them. A law adopted in 1991 gave the Greek State power to appoint the Muftis, even without the support of the Muslim minority of Thrace. This law dramatically amputates its autonomy, guaranteed by the Treaty of Lausanne, and created divisions and tensions in the community.

Correctly, Greece was condemned twice by the European Court of Human Rights in cases where two muftis elected by their community were sentenced to prison terms on the alleged ground that they had usurped the title of state-appointed muftis that the Muslim community refused to recognize as their spiritual leaders.

Human Rights Without Frontiers urges the Greek authorities to treat the Muslim minority on the same footing as the Catholic and Jewish minorities in matters concerning the choice of their religious leaders.