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Turkish Police Halt Press Conference for Bishop

Status of Turkey's Evangelical Protestants Remains Unclear

by Barbara G. Baker

COMPASS DIRECT (19.11.1999)/HRWF International Secretariat (10.12.1999) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A team of plainclothes Turkish policemen cancelled an Istanbul press conference on the spot October 22, refusing to allow the visiting Bishop of Rochester to address the Turkish media.

As a guest of Turkey's independent Protestant churches, Bishop Michael Nazir Ali had been invited to Turkey as part of preliminary millennium celebrations to observe the 2000th anniversary of Christ's birth. The Anglican cleric's hosts had booked a seminar room at the Ceylan International Hotel for the press meeting.

A police spokesman who said he had been sent from the Istanbul governor's office told Bishop Michael through an interpreter that he regretted having to cancel the press conference. He said the meeting's sponsors had failed to obtain permission from security police headquarters, which he said was required under Code 2911 of the Meetings and Demonstrations Law.

"I'm used to freedom," the bishop commented in response, as some 20 curious Turkish TV cameramen and journalists crowded around. "Even in Iran, I've held press conferences. So I've never had this happen before."

But with the exception of one outraged columnist for "Radikal" newspaper, the Turkish media bowed to the police edict, remaining silent about the abrupt cancellation of Bishop Michael's press conference.

A Pakistani Muslim by birth, Bishop Michael is one of Great Britain's leading apologists in Muslim-Christian dialogue. During his three-day visit to Turkey, he met with local church leaders, addressed a joint service of Istanbul Protestant Christians and later toured earthquake relief projects being funded and staffed by Christians from around the world.

The aborted press conference was the third overt police interference in activities of Turkey's evangelical churches since the beginning of September. In previous police raids on September 12 and October 3, two entire congregations in Izmir and Istanbul were arrested and carted off for interrogations.

The 40 Izmir parishioners arrested in September were detained for 24 hours, fingerprinted and subjected to interrogations by the Terrorism Bureau of the police. Their church remains sealed by Interior Ministry orders, pending a court ruling on the administrative laws under which Turkish authorities claim the church does not have "permission" to meet. The church's lawyer expects it could take a year or more for the court case to be resolved.

However, Izmir police officials have notified the church that they have been authorized to reopen the building for general use by the congregation, for any purpose other than worship.

In a subsequent development in the last week of October, local police stations in Izmir began verbally informing each one of the arrested Izmir Christians that they were required to pay a \$32 fine for attending an "illegal" meeting. Police authorities refused to put the notice in writing, but required the members of the congregation to sign an acknowledgment that they had been informed of the penalty against them.

"The majority of our members are refusing to pay this," Pastor Zekai Tanyar said, "and will contest this in court."

In Istanbul, the crackdown against the Zeytinburnu Fellowship of Jesus Christ has most harshly affected the expatriates who were present during the police raid. Although all the Turkish citizens were released as soon as they had been interrogated, the foreigners were kept under arrest, some for several days, until their embassies came to "bail" them out.

Two Bulgarian pastors and four Koreans on tourist visas were forcibly deported, with their passports stamped "persona non grata" to prevent their return to Turkey.

The five adult foreigners with legal Turkish residence visas had their documents confiscated by the Foreign Police and are still required to report weekly at police headquarters. It is not clear whether their detention will affect the renewal of their residency in the coming months.

Five weeks after the raid, the Istanbul prosecutor still had not submitted a ruling on the case, claiming he needed to further examine the materials confiscated at the church. "Last week he called and asked for a written copy of the Turkish script for the 'Jesus' film," reported a church elder, who protested that the Christian documentary film had been licensed and sold legally in Turkey for years.

The Turkish pastor of another evangelical church located in Istanbul's Besiktas district was visited on October 21 by police authorities, who said they had been ordered to submit a report on the church.

Pastor Engin Yildirim told Compass he was informed that his church's framed "certificate of notification" did not constitute official permission to meet, so the authorities would have to seal the premises. Yildirim was also told that the church

would have to get approval from "the entire neighborhood" to establish meetings for worship in this rented facility.

After discussion, Turkish Protestant church leaders called for a week of prayer and fasting the last week of October. In a public release, they encouraged Christians around the world to contact Turkish Embassies about these recent incidents, to ask why foreign tourists were being arrested for attending evangelical church services.

As congregations, they also agreed to implement some pragmatic legal approaches in an attempt to establish themselves officially. "It may turn out to be a long legal battle, but we are determined to find a clear solution with the state," declared Izmir's Tanyar.

"The constitution is clear about freedom of religion and expression," he continued. "But there are no laws regarding establishing churches, so this void causes problems with authorities who choose to act according to their own discretion."

In a full-page interview in the October 24 Sunday edition of "Sabah," a national newspaper, Ankara pastor Ihsan Ozbek told columnist Nuriye Akman, "We are being treated like terrorists." Protesting that the police do not even allow Protestant Christians to put up a sign labeling their buildings as a church, Ozbek declared, "From now on, we are going to seek redress at the international level."

"We are going to react from now on," Ozbek pledged, "because [the authorities] are acting illegally. They come during worship and raid churches. I have accused them officially. But they are doing nothing about it. So we must speak more loudly."

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Explosive Device Against Greek Minority High School in Istanbul

The Constantinopolitan Society (October 1999)/HRWF International Secretariat (03.11.1999) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - On October 6, 1999, yet another incidence of terrorism against the Greek Minority of Istanbul took place.

An extremist right-wing organisation planted an explosive mechanism in Zographeion Lyceum - a secondary-level Greek Minority school situated in a busy downtown section of Istanbul - shattering glass and causing minor material damages to the building. As with countless instances in the past - nobody was apprehended by the police. The same organisation has claimed responsibility for planting explosive devices at the Eastern Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate and Greek Community churches.

Unfortunately, these and other acts aggravate the prevalent insecurity among the few Greeks still domiciled in Istanbul, sending across a clear message, namely that the only recourse for the Greek Community is to flee from their homes and from the country. Recent hostile actions even included atrocities such as the desecration of graves in Christian cemeteries.

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American Tourists Arrested

by Barbara G. Baker

Compass Direct (20.08.1999)/HRWF International Secretariat (24.09.1999) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Turkish security police arrested and deported 15 American students from the Aegean port city of Izmir in late July for conducting religious surveys and distributing Christian literature in a local park.

Detained on the evening of July 28, the 15 American were held for some 30 hours before being put on a flight to Chicago in the early hours of July 30. The students from the U.S. state of Arkansas had been scheduled to tour across Turkey until August 18.

A South African accompanying them was not released until late on July 31, after Ankara officials apparently informed the Izmir police they could not legally deport a foreigner who had official residency in Turkey.

Police required the group to move out of their hotel with their suitcases; the police searched all their belongings. The students' personal Bibles, handwritten journals and all Christian materials found in their possession were confiscated and not returned.

The entire group reportedly sat in the hallway of the police station throughout the first night, while they were taken one by one for questioning. Each signed statements in Turkish that the officials said were admissions that they had been handing out "religious propaganda".

Two of the group's representatives were brought before the public prosecutor late the following afternoon. The magistrate never addressed or questioned them during the courtroom proceedings, which they said lasted less than five minutes, and no translator was provided.

As they left, the officer accompanying them said all the charges had been dropped and they were free. However, they were then handed over to a representative of the Foreign Ministry, who told them they would each have to pay \$125 to change their plane tickets and leave the country immediately.

Several students said they were told that they were being required to leave "for their own safety," allegedly because Muslim extremists were upset about their "missionary activities". However, they said officials at the U.S. Consulate in Izmir assured them that their lives were never in danger.

After being placed in cells temporarily, the Americans were relocated late that night in a hotel, remaining under police supervision until they left for the airport, where airline personnel were given custody of their passports.

Turkey's flamboyant press jumped on the story promptly, with banner headlines ranging from "Missionaries Caught Red-handed" to "Apostles of Separatism."

The sensationalist daily Star claimed the 16 Christians were handing out \$100 bills to win converts, holding secret worship services and targeting university students of ethnic Kurdish backgrounds. The final allegation was apparently based on finding in someone's luggage a single copy of a leaflet entitled, "Who are the Kurds?"

After the semi-official Anatolian News Agency briefly confirmed the incident, the country's only english-language newspaper, the Turkish Daily News, noted in a short July 30 article that "these young people were disseminating Christian propaganda by distributing bibles as well as pamphlets related to Christianity."

Although Christian or other religious propaganda is thought by most Turks to be illegal, Turkish law only prohibits religious propaganda that has a proven political motive. Nevertheless, security police routinely detain foreign Christians on broad statutes such as Section 534 of the Turkish Penal Code, which assesses a small fine for distributing literature in a public place without permission.

Public prosecutors usually dismiss such charges and order the suspects freed. But once outside the courtroom, the police then tell foreign tourists that they must pay for their own immediate deportation. The alternative is remaining under detention, in cells with common criminals, illegal refugees and prostitutes.

Several Turkish newspaper and television reports claimed that group members were found guilty and charged fines equal to \$12.50 each before their deportation.

But according to Mattheus Hendrikus, the South African accompanying the group, "We knew nothing about this, that we were fined. We only read that later in the newspapers. No one ever asked us for money."

Hendrikus said he was told when released that after he returned to Trabzon, where he runs a liaison tourism bureau, local police would contact him regarding the case. He and his wife have been residents in Turkey since 1995.

In a telephone interview with the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette published August 4, group leader Rocky Favia, Jr. Explained the group's park witnessing effort as low-key and straightforward.

"We asked them if they'd like a copy of the New Testament, and if they said yes, we gave them one. Apparently, someone took offense and reported it," Favia told the newspaper.

Although 99 percent Muslim, the Turkish state has claimed a creed of strict secularism since its founding in 1923 by Kemal Ataturk. Government officials insist its laws against religious activism are designed to prevent Islamists from forming a Muslim state, and not to restrict the religious freedom of its few citizens who are not Muslim, either by birth or choice.

But for the most part, the country's 65 million people maintain the centuries-old Ottoman mindset, that to be a Turk is to be a Muslim.

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Turkish Protestant Church Remains Sealed in Izmir

Interior Minister Meets with Three Protestant Leaders Over Incident

by Barbara G. Baker

Compass Direct (24.09.1999)/HRWF Internatinal Secretariat (29.09.1999) - website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Despite a high-level meeting between the Turkish Interior Minister and local Protestant leaders this week, a Christian church raided by security police 12 days ago remains sealed in the Aegean port city of Izmir.

Three representatives of the Independent Turkish Protestant Churches met this past Monday with Interior Minister Saadettin Tantan about the September 12 incident, which had attracted Reuters, Associated Press and BBC coverage internationally.

Turkish police arrested 40 Christians at Sunday morning worship services of the Izmir Fellowship of Jesus Christ, accusing the gathering of being an "illegal" church. After 24 hours in police detention, the 35 Turks and five foreigners were released by order of the Izmir Public Prosecutor, who ruled that the congregation's activities in their place of worship were protected under constitutional guarantees of freedom of worship and belief.

However, Izmir security police have refused to unseal the church doors until they receive written orders to do so from their superiors in Ankara.

According to Izmir pastor Zekai Tanyar, Minister Tantan "listened carefully" during their 25-minute audience, asking a number of questions regarding the legal status of Turkish Protestant Christians, estimated to number less than 2,000.

The minister promised to study the background file presented to him by the three pastors, to ensure that their legal rights to freedom of religion were expedited. Under Turkish law, the authorities must be informed in writing of all designated places of worship, but no formal registration or permission process is required.

Meanwhile, the congregation remains shut out of their own facilities, purchased in 1994 in Izmir's Karatas district.

Last Sunday, the Turkish congregation was invited to worship with the Lighthouse International Church, an English-language Protestant church in Izmir's downtown Alsancak district.

On Tuesday, the church sent a petition to the Izmir Governor to re-open the church, attaching the prosecutor's written decision that there were "no grounds for further legal action" against the defendants. However, the petition had to be routed through Izmir's security police headquarters, which sent it off to Ankara, not to the governor's office.

Izmir security police insist that the church is required by administrative laws to obtain the written permission of all the other owners in the building to use their facility for religious worship. According to Erdem Canitez, the church's legal counsel, the statute in question simply gives neighboring owners the right to file a legal protest if they have any complaints against each other. In mid-August, the church's lawyer had filed a case in the administrative courts to clarify the dispute.

"Twice now the prosecutors have ruled that the police are misinterpreting the law," Tanyar said. "So my question is, shouldn't the police wait for the court's ruling on this before taking any action?"

"We don't mind in the long term waiting for the court to decide on certain procedures," the pastor told Compass. "But in the meantime, it is just unacceptable to have the church sealed, and to be treated in this way." According to their lawyer, it could take up to a year for the courts to rule formally on this legal technicality.

Tanyar admitted that he was still "uncomfortable" with the fact that the 40 Christians were arrested, interrogated by the Terrorism Division and kept in detention for 24 hours, but they were never allowed to come before the prosecutor and give their defense.

Several national newspaper columnists spoke out sharply this week against the police action, as well as the curious link with a private TV channel and newspaper that tried to exploit the arrests.

"Radikal" columnist Arda Uskun questioned on September 20 why -- after the church had met openly and officially for six years -- the police interrupted them during worship and hauled them off forcibly one by one, like guilty criminals. "The apparent 'crime' was to be both a Turk and a Christian," Uskun concluded.

Columnist Turan Kalkan in the conservative Muslim daily "Zaman" termed the unprecedented police disruption of a Christian worship service something "hardly found in the 16th century," describing it as behavior "unbecoming to our government."

"This event casts a pall over all the hard work done to attract tourists to Turkey and its image abroad," admitted Serdar Alyamac in Monday's "Turkish Daily News." In the wake of terrorist attacks by Kurdish separatists and then the devastating August 17 earthquake, the Turkish Tourism Ministry has pinned its hopes on a "faith tourism" build-up for the year 2,000 to improve 1999's dismal tourism showing.

"Making religion the focus of sensationalist news is treading on dangerous ground," Alyamac stressed, stating that it "should not be allowed, especially when it is a groundless attack."

As chairman of the Turkish Pastors Council, Ankara Pastor Ihsan Ozturk sent an e-mail message last week to the Turkish mainline media, who had at that point paid scant attention to the incident.

"If the police in a European country had sealed up a mosque and hauled off in buses the Muslims worshipping there under arrest," Ozturk asked pointedly, "what would our reaction be?"

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Turkish Police Arrested 40 Protestant Christians in Izmir

Prosecutor Throws Media-Invented Charges Out of Court

by Barbara G. Baker

Compass Direct (14.09.1999)/HRWF International Secretariat (15.09.1999)- Turkish police, accompanied by the crew of a private TV channel, disrupted the worship services of an established Protestant church in Izmir last Sunday morning, arresting 40 adults worshipping in what officials claimed was an "illegal" church.

But according to the church's lawyer, Erdem Canitez, it was the police raid itself which was "contrary to established law."

Eyewitnesses told Compass that some 20 intruders stormed into the Izmir Fellowship of Jesus Christ on September 12. Half of them were plainclothes policemen, they later realized, intermixed with reporters, photographers and cameramen from Star TV and its sister tabloid, also named "Star." Arriving about 15 minutes after the

morning service had begun, they walked up and down the aisles, filming the congregation singing hymns.

The security police then stopped the church service, taking into custody all the adults as well as several teenagers under 18 and ordered them into two police buses parked outside. Two young mothers with infant children were allowed to leave, with eight minor children left to fend for themselves after their parents were taken away.

According to a 14-year-old Turkish Christian left behind, "It was my first time to see someone bring machine guns into a church." Several hours after his mother and two uncles were taken off by the police, he bicycled back to the church building and watched as police sealed the church door, prohibiting entry without a court order.

Although 35 of those arrested were Turks, five were foreigners: one long-term American resident of Izmir, a Turkish-born Anglican priest of dual citizenship and his Australian wife, an unidentified Korean visitor, and a Bulgarian woman.

Several first-time visitors were arrested along with the congregation, including one unhappy passerby who had heard the singing from the street and entered out of curiosity.

Held for 24 hours, all 40 were kept at security police headquarters overnight for questioning at the Terrorism Bureau. "We were treated as criminal suspects," one said, "but I refused to state my 'crime' when asked, insisting that I had not committed any crime." After giving and signing their official statements, all were photographed, fingerprinted and taken for a medical check, to confirm they had not been tortured while under arrest.

"We were not treated badly, although we were locked into two large cells overnight," one of the detainees told Compass. "The only time they yelled at us was when we started singing in the cells. So we had to tone things down, and just read Scripture and pray together quietly."

When the Izmir Public Prosecutor's Office opened yesterday morning, Prosecutor Ahmet Vural promptly threw out the allegations, declaring that the church was meeting legally under Turkish laws regulating the freedom of religion and conscience. Vural ordered the church's doors unsealed and the return of all the books, tapes and videos confiscated by the police.

Although the 35 Turks were discharged immediately, police stalled on releasing the five foreigners for another two hours. In the Foreign Police section, the expatriates said security officers declared that they were above the decisions of the prosecutor and the courts. "It doesn't matter what they've decided," they reportedly remarked. "We can go ahead and deport you if we like."

Although at least two of the visiting tourists were required to sign a paper agreeing to leave Turkey, in the end all five with foreign passports were released. Two of the expatriates had official, long-term residence visas to live in the country.

According to Pastor Zekai Tanyar, his church had been subjected to a previous police investigation in September of last year. At that time, the public prosecutor had also

issued a written statement verifying that the church had been meeting at its current premises legally, with the full knowledge and permission of local authorities, since 1994.

"But this was ignored, and our freedom to meet was overridden," Tanyar declared yesterday, in a open statement distributed to the Turkish press. "Unfortunately," the pastor said, "certain media groups in an effort to create 'sensational' news have opposed our beliefs in an aggressive and disrespectful manner." None of today's Turkish newspapers made any mention of Tanyar's statement.

On the Sunday evening news, Star TV aired an "exclusive" on the arrests over its national channel. The next morning, the daily "Star" devoted the entire third page to the trumped-up case. Calling the group a "pirate church," the paper claimed that they were meeting secretly and illegally, under the leadership of foreigners.

In a previous "expose" published September 9, "Star" had announced that "missionary priests" were running around the Izmir area brainwashing and baptizing Turkish youth, tempting them with offers to furnish them jobs and a wife.

Today, the current chairman of the Turkish Pastors Council labeled the combined police-media raid a "vicious attack."

"The police are violating in the most obvious way our freedom to worship," declared Ankara Pastor Ihsan Ozbek.

Ozbek said he did not believe that the persecution being aimed at the Turkish Protestant churches was either organized or supported by the government. "But it is being carried out by local individuals, acting on their own caprice," he charged.

Accordingly, leaders of the Turkish Independent Protestant Churches are requesting a meeting with the Interior Minister over the incident. "The truth about the situation of [Christian] believers here needs to be accepted by Turkish officials," Ozbek said. Under Turkish law, citizens can register their change of religion and establish official worship centers recognized by the government.

Established more than 20 years ago as a Protestant congregation, the Izmir Fellowship had purchased its current premises in 1994. In previous years, it had met in the facilities of various other churches in the Aegean port city. According to Tanyar, the church now has a core of 50 members, and only two or three foreigners attend regularly. Sunday worship services can vary from 50 to 90 in attendance, he said.

Tanyar noted that in the wake of Turkey's devastating August 17 earthquake, he and the members of his church had spent the past few weeks in almost full-time relief work. "We are extremely sorry and offended to be treated as though we are not citizens of this country," he admitted.

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Turkey's Armenian Community Reiterates 'Institutional' Dilemmas

by Barbara G. Baker

Compass Direct (20.08.1999)/HRWF International Secretariat (24.09.1999) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The leader of Turkey's largest Christian community met with government leaders in mid June, presenting Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit with a file highlighting five "institutional dilemmas" facing the Armenian community.

During a half-hour meeting in ankara with Ecevit on June 16, Armenian Patriarch Mesrob II explained that while citizens from the religious minorities enjoy equality before the law with other Turkish citizens in terms of economic, social and religious freedoms, the same freedoms do not always extend on an institutional basis to their minority communities.

Noting that Ecevit's new coalition government had begun an ambitious attempt to modernize the nation's laws, Patriarch Mesrob told the prime minister that the Armenian community would be "pleased if we are able to receive our share" of these legal reforms, the weekly Agos newspaper reported on June 18.

"I confess that I have learned some problems I did not know about," Ecevit reportedly told the patriarch, after reading the details contained in the eight-page report.

In practical terms, the file called for a thorough updating an reworking of the regulations and bylaws governing minority foundations, most dating back to the 1930s.

At the top of the Armenian community's concerns was the steady government confiscation of the property of its religious trusts since a 1974 Supreme Court of Appeals ruling, now considered a legal precedent for handling all minority trusts.

The decision defined such foundations as "non-Turkish", and therefore forbidden to either buy or sell real estate acquired since 1936, when the government asked for a list of the foundations' property and unmovable assets. Any land, building or real estate donated to or purchased by Armenian religious trusts since that time now legally reverts to the state, without any remuneration - albeit in a lengthy judicial process as long as 10 years or more.

A second slow-paced tourniquet on Armenian-owned foundations is being applied through an antiquated system of electoral districts within Istanbul, where Armenians no longer cluster in the same residential areas. Under current Turkish legal restrictions, those who have moved away from these neighborhoods are no longer eligible to vote for or serve on the administrative boards of the respective trusts. As a result, elections are barred indefinitely, financial transactions are blocked and trusts are in danger of being closed down by the state.

Still another dilemma is posed by a 1981 decree requiring all Armenian religious trusts to shoulder a five-percent tax to pay for government inspections and audits. Greek Christian and Jewish trusts, like all Muslim foundations, are exempt from this tax.

Non-profit Armenian institutions such as schools and hospitals are also required by the Ministry of Finance to pay corporate income taxes, since these community charities charge for their services. However, all these trusts are debit operations subsidized from within the community.

A final concern focused on the uncertain future of Holy Cross High School, originally opened to train Armenian clergy.

Since 1985, the government has refused to approve elections for the school board. Now, 18 years after the last election, only a few school board members are still living, with no government permission in sight to elect new administrators to keep it in operation.

"Some of these issues are very difficult," the patriarch commented. "But that doesn't make it all just. So we are encouraged by reports that in fact the government is working on it now."

The state protocol visit by Patriarch Mesrob II, his first with leaders of the Turkish government in Ankara since his enthronement in November 1998, was occasioned by the forming of a new coalition comprising the 57th government of Turkey.

In a subsequent meeting in early August with the visiting U.S. assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor, Harold Koh, the Armenian patriarch told Koh that his church had abandoned the idea of reopening its seminary, closed down in the 1970s.

Although he noted that there was "not even one Christian seminary in Turkey," Patriarch Mesrob commented that the Muslim and Jewish communities were not allowed to have religious training institutions, either.

"We are rather seeking ways of implementing an inter-disciplinary course of university-level studies leading to a Bachelor of Liberal Arts in Christian Theology," the patriarch said.

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Turkish Police Arrest Two Christians in Istanbul

By Barbara G. Baker

Compass Direct (20.08.1999)/HRWF International Secretariat (23.09.1999) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Two Christians manning a religious bookstand at a local fair in suburban Istanbul were detained August 3 by Turkish police and accused of selling books in a public place without official permission.

Australian Ian McLure, who has worked as an English teacher in Turkey for the past 12 years, was arrested along with a Christian of Turkish citizenship as they sold books at the summer Entel Bazaar in Avcilar, a coastal suburb along the western edge of Istanbul.

McLure, 48, was released on August 5 from Istanbul's security police headquarters, several hours after a representative of the Australian Consulate visited him in the foreigners' detention center. His Turkish companion was released the previous afternoon.

Although no charges were pressed against the Turk, McLure was fined 15 million Turkish lira (\$35) by a public prosecutor in Kucukcekmece for violating Article 534 of the Turkish Penal Code. The often-ignored statute has been enforced in recent weeks by Turkish authorities to stop a proliferation of streetside booksellers of all types, including religious ones.

McLure's court-appointed lawyer, Yilmaz Aslan, told Compass that McLure's August 5 payment of the fine closed the prosecutor's case against his client.

However, the Australian learned just before his release that a new court case had been opened against him. McLure is reportedly accused of being "illegally employed" selling books, which police said was not permissible under his work permit allowing him to teach English.

Accordingly, security police confiscated McLure's passport, forbidding him to leave the country. For the next few months until his case is heard, he is required to report to police headquarters every Monday. The Australian said his consulate representative signed documents agreeing that the Australian authorities would not issue him another passport while the case is under Turkish judicial review.

McLure said he was greatly relieved when his companion was released and all charges were dropped against him. However, Compass has confirmed that the Turkish Christian was beaten and threatened by the police with physical attacks against his wife and small children. In his late 30s, the arrested Turk had converted to Christianity 10 years ago. Under Turkey's secular laws, he formally changed his religious identity from Muslim to Christian when he was baptized six years ago.

According to McLure, who spoke with Compass a few hours before his release, plainclothes police had visited the bookstand on Sunday, August 1, and declared it should be closed down. The Australian said he asked them to explain such an order in the context of Article 26 of the constitution, which guarantees "the freedom to receive and impart information and ideas without interference from official authorities."

"I wouldn't think of doing this in a normal bazar in the city," McLure told Compass. "But this is an 'entel' fair, for intellectual discussion and exchanges, and we've been doing this for three years now, with the full knowledge and permission of the local municipality authorities."

He said at least a third of their books were secular, with the rest being New Testaments and Christian titles.

He noted that an article appearing in the small local weekly Gerçek newspaper in Avcilar on July 13 complained about the "missionary stand" at the evening bazar, claiming that this "illegal Christian propaganda" was making the local citizenry uncomfortable. Although no proof of its claims was offered, the paper called on local authorities to "solve" the problem.

Security police initially insisted that McLure be deported, but the Turkish foreign Ministry usually opposes such a measure against expatriates who are legal residents working in the country.

A native of Sydney, McLure is married with three children.

The Istanbul arrests came in the wake of a spate of other police actions against both local Christians and visiting Christian tourists across Turkey in July and August.

On July 16, a group of European tourists in Istanbul were called into the police station and subjected to hotel searches and confiscation of New Testaments and Christian materials in their possession. They were released a few hours later. The same week, security police arrested three Christians working at a bookstand sponsored by Good News Publishers at a city fair in Izmir and confiscated their entire book stock. Two Turkish citizens, both converts who had changed their religious identity papers, were detained and interrogated overnight along with a Korean national. All three were released the following day.

In late July the international press reported that 15 American students were deported from the Aegean port city of Izmir for alleged "Christian propaganda." Although one Turkish paper claimed the students were handing out \$100 bills to entice converts and were promoting separatism among ethnic Kurds, the group from Arkansas were apparently found guilty by the public prosecutor for taking surveys and distributing literature publicly without formal permission. They paid for their own deportation on July 30.

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Armenian Grade School Evicted from Istanbul Property

COMPASS (19.03.1999)/HRWF (06.05.1999) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The abrupt eviction of 45 primary-age Armenian children from their

Istanbul school building just days before the winter school term started in early February captured wide attention across Turkey.

With all their desks, blackboards and classroom equipment shoved into the schoolyard under rainy skies on February 2, the crying students grabbed headlines in national dailies and evening news spots on 10 television channels for the next few days.

At issue was the legal ownership of the Bomonti Armenian Elementary School, a church institution begun in 1808 by the Armenian Catholic Church. The Armenian Catholic Mekhitarayan School and Monastery Foundation had operated the school from its current premises since 1963.

Unwittingly, the heavy-handed move to expropriate this church school's property dramatized before the Turkish nation a longstanding procedure under which the country's religious minorities have been forbidden since 1936 to purchase any new properties.

No Turkish law actually forbids non-Muslim foundations from buying property. But in the mass-circulation Hurriyet newspaper, Aysen Gur wrote on February 8 that a "deceitful implementation" of the 1936 document listing minority-owned properties had been followed by the government for the past 25 years.

The present Bomonti school was originally purchased in 1958, when the Mekhitarayan Foundation acquired a formal deed of sale for the property.

But in 1979, foundation officials were told by inspectors from the General Directorate of Foundations that this deed was no longer valid. Even though they had paid for the property, the authorities said, they were not the rightful owners of it.

Back in 1936, the government explained, Turkey's minority communities had been ordered to list all the properties owned by their various religious foundations. Ever since, this beyanname (written declaration) listing those properties was considered an official mandate forbidding non-Muslim foundations to purchase any additional properties.

The Armenian Catholic foundation hired a lawyer to contest the threatened takeover. But as they had been warned, their deed was thrown out in court eventually, and in 1984 the property reverted to the heirs of the original owner. The school received no compensation, and the board had to negotiate annual rent contracts with the new owners to continue use of the building.

"We became the tenants of a building which we once owned," Bomonti school principal Mary Degirmencioglu told Hurriyet newspaper on February 5. "And now, even that is being taken away from us."

According to Vahe Aslanata, head of the Bomonti school board, the school had renewed its rent contract for the 1998-99 school year with the Ayas municipality in Ankara, which now owns 75 percent of the property shares.

However, the Miltas Company, Inc., which had purchased the other 25 percent of the shares, opened a case in claims court last year to evict the school. After winning a court order to take over the building, with the company lawyer and local police in tow, Miltas representatives emptied out the school on February 2, stacking all its movable assets out in the yard and installing new locks on the empty building. The school was given 20 days to reclaim and remove the equipment in the schoolyard.

Forging a temporary solution, Istanbul governor Erol Cakir intervened to obtain a signed protocol between the Bomonti school authorities and the Miltas Company that the school would vacate the property by the end of June this year. The agreement permitted the school to re-occupy the building immediately and commence school classes again on February 8.

The following day, Republican People's Party (CHP) deputy Ercan Karakas filed a parliamentary inquiry on the church school's eviction and the 1936 order behind it. "Is the Turkish Republic not required to treat equally all the foundations formed by its citizens?" Karakas asked, requesting a written response from the speaker of Parliament on the issue.

In a February 28 radio interview in the United States, Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul Mesrob II commented on the controversial 1936 document, which he termed a "misrepresentation" of the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 designed to guarantee the rights of religious minorities in Turkey and Greece.

"This decision... claims that minorities cannot own any new property other than what they had at the time the Lausanne Treaty was signed," Patriarch Mesrob said. "In the 1970s, the state said what we had listed in 1936 was what we can own, and anything else that we have received after that we have to return."

"This is a nonsensical decision that has to be, in some way, remedied," the patriarch commented.

According to Luiz Bakar, an Istanbul lawyer and press spokesperson for the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate, at least 40 properties owned by Christian foundations in Istanbul have already been commandeered by the Turkish state on the basis of this 1936 statement.

In the majority of cases, the government has simply waited until the benefactors who donated property to non-Muslim foundations died. Then a court case was filed by the General Directorate of Foundations to cancel the post-1936 deed, allowing the property to revert to the heirs of the original owner.

Dozens of additional church institutions, including churches, schools, and hospitals, are in jeopardy right now, Bakar said. Lengthy court proceedings have, in some cases, delayed a final decision for a decade or more, but so far not a single non-Muslim religious foundation has managed to keep property bought after 1936.

"In lay terms," one Armenian in Istanbul told Compass, "this shows that in Turkey the mosque and the church are not equal in economic rights. Muslim foundations can buy and sell real estate, and individuals can bequeath property if they like. But Christians or Jews are not allowed this privilege."