

I thank the U.S. Helsinki Commission for the opportunity to bring to your attention the deleterious efforts of the government of Turkey to undermine the existence of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the spiritual center of the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians, located in Istanbul, Turkey. I am the National Commander of the Order of St. Andrew / Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which is under the direct jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its Exarch in the United States, Archbishop Demetrios of America.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Ecumenical Patriarchate is the victim of religious persecution by the government of Turkey. This persecution is systematic - involving multiple levels of government including local and national, judicial and legislative; insidious - occurring over many decades; and devastating - designed to ultimately obliterate the very existence of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

The Order of St. Andrew is an organization comprised of the leading Orthodox Christians in the United States whose mission is to support and defend the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Our ranks include members of Congress such as Senator Paul Sarbanes and Congressman Michael Bilirakis, former members of White House administrations including George Tenet and Tom Korologos, businessmen such as Alex Spanos, the owner of the San Diego Chargers, professionals and academicians such as Dr. John Brademas, former president of New York University and Dr. Constantine Papadakis, President of Drexel University, members of the federal bench and preeminent stewards of the Orthodox Faith throughout the United States.

I want to bring to your attention various violations of religious human rights that the Archons have personally witnessed during our many pilgrimages to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Turkey and our recent visits with the government leaders in Ankara. The United States Department of State with the assistance of Under Secretary of State Marc Grossman, and in cooperation with past and present ambassadors to Turkey, including Ambassadors Marc Parris, Robert Pearson and currently Eric Edelman has been instrumental in fortifying our position to seek religious freedom in Turkey. Ambassador Edelman is especially committed to seeking an improvement in their dismal religious human rights record. He accompanied the Archon Leadership in February and December 2004 to meet with Cabinet Ministers of the governing AK Party in Ankara including Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, Minister of Education Hüseyin Çelik, Minister of State responsible for Religious Affairs Mehmet Aydin and Minister of Interior Abdulkadir Aksu.

The government of Turkey imposes severe restrictions on the ownership of property by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and of the Greek Orthodox Community, as His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios earlier stated. It has confiscated thousands of properties of the Greek Orthodox community. More specifically, in 1936 some 7000 properties were registered as duly owned by the Greek Orthodox community of Turkey. Through government expropriation, that number was reduced to approximately 2000 properties in 1999 and to less than 500 in 2005. Stated another way, the Ecumenical Patriarchate and its institutions do not have the right to buy, sell and inherit properties.

A calamitous example of this process is taking place at this very moment on the Island of Büyükada, off the coast of Istanbul. On October 21, 2004, the Turkish Supreme Court handed down a decision in favor of the government and against the Ecumenical Patriarchate to confiscate its orphanage along with its vast properties owned by the church since 1902. This facility once cared for some 200 orphans, but due to the Pogroms of 1955 and 1964 when most Greek inhabitants of Istanbul were forced to immigrate, the Orphanage fell into disuse and disrepair. At the time of the most recent Archon visit in December we inspected the property and found it to be in a state of complete ruin. Repeated attempts to maintain the property were unsuccessful for decades because the authorities refused to grant building permits. The government of Turkey, with the approval of its Supreme Court has now finalized plans to confiscate this property.

Another example of failing to grant building permits can be cited with respect to the November 2003 terrorist bombings in Istanbul destroying the British Consulate and damaging two synagogues and a Greek Orthodox Church. The synagogues were allowed by the Turkish authorities to rebuild in a timely manner, yet the Ecumenical Patriarchate waited over a year for permission to repair its house of worship, the Church of the Virgin Mary which was just granted on December 17, 2004. This is unjust but emblematic of the modus operandi of the government of Turkey.

In addition, during our recent inspection of Balukli Hospital and Home for the Aged, a 250 year old Patriarchal Affiliated Institution located in Istanbul serving 30-40 thousand Turkish patients each year, Archon Legal Counselor Christopher Stratakis obtained a certified list of 144 confiscated properties of this charitable institution. It should be stated also, that this hospital which is a vital asset to the Turkish community of Istanbul recently has been informed that it is now subject to a 42% retroactive tax to 1999.

Another example of religious persecution is the forcible closure of the Halki School of Theology resulting in the inability of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to train its clergy locally. Included among the graduates of the Halki Seminary are His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop Iakovos, the former Archbishop of North and South America. The government has refused to allow the reopening of the Seminary, despite assurances to the contrary to President George W. Bush in January 2004 by Prime Minister Erdogan and to President Bill Clinton in November 1999 by President Suleman Demeril. In fact, we are now even more pessimistic and discouraged that Turkey does not have the political will to reopen Halki, nor relax the religious persecution that pervades the government after our most recent meeting with Foreign Minister Gul.

In his Inaugural Address President George W. Bush stated: "We will encourage reform in other governments by making clear that success in our relations will require the decent treatment of their own people." And, "In the long run, there is no justice without freedom, and there can be no human rights without human liberty." My fellow Americans of the Helsinki Commission, Turkey is denying basic religious human rights to its own citizens of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Greek Orthodox Community. These Turkish citizens do not have the liberty to practice their faith without fear of attack, own property, train their clergy or freely elect their church leaders.

It is the expectation of Orthodox citizens of the United States whose spiritual leadership is located in Istanbul, that Turkey must comply with the various human rights documents to which they are signatories. If they wish to accede to the European Union, they will need to correct the systemic, insidious and devastating policies of religious persecution. In closing, I respectfully submit a number of exhibits as a component of this presentation.

1. Turkey's Compliance With Its Obligations to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Orthodox Christian Minority, by Maria Burnett, Maria Pulzetti, and Sean Young of the Yale University School of Law; Executive Summary and Complete Treatise
2. The Ecumenical Patriarchate, A Brief Guide, by Fr. John Chryssavgis (Insert)
3. A Fact Sheet on the Ecumenical Patriarchate
4. Supreme Court Decision of Turkey regarding the confiscation of Patriarchal Orphanage of Island of Büyükada, October 21, 2004
5. Human Rights –Turkey on the Road to Europe – Religious Freedom? by The Catholic Church's Pontifical Mission Society, Human Rights Office, Otmar Oehring – 2004
6. The Return of the Relics, DVD, the Return of the Holy Relics of St. Gregory the Theologian and St. John Chrysostom by Pope John Paul II to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew
7. Listing of Properties Confiscated by Government of Turkey from Balukli Hospital and Home for the Aged, Istanbul, Turkey, from 1974 to 2002; Certified by Demetrios Karagianis, Chairman, Board of Trustees, Balukli Hospital
8. The Ecumenical Patriarchate, CD-ROM, sponsored by the Order of St. Andrew / Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in America