

# Turkish Protestants still face "long path" to religious freedom

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March 4, 2011

Warsaw, March 4 (ENInews)--A senior Turkish Protestant has said his country's small Christian churches still face severe hardships, despite recent pledges by the government to improve protection of religious rights.

"We can't deny certain positive steps - since 2005, we've been able to apply for legal status as registered associations," said Zekai Tanyar, executive board chairman of Turkey's Association of Protestant Churches.

"But full religious freedom is still a long way off here, and all Christian denominations face difficulties. Government officials assure us they'll look into our problems, such as by offering us police protection. But no attempt is being made to present us in a more positive light."

The 58-year-old Protestant was speaking after publication in early February of a letter to the Turkish government by Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner, which welcomed a "constructive dialogue" now underway on religious rights, but also highlighted continuing restrictions.

In an ENI interview, Tanyar said Protestants differed from Turkey's Armenian and Greek Orthodox Christians, since most came from recent Muslim Turkish backgrounds, rather than from ethnic minorities, and did not have historic claims to churches and properties in the country.

However, he added that, despite being ethnic Turks, they were viewed as "not belonging," and as "collaborators with the forces of Christendom which are out to break up the country." All Turkish governments had sought to avoid any impression of "compromising with Christians," Tanyar said.

"The dialogue occurring is a polite, diplomatic process, which hasn't so far achieved anything very concrete - mentalities haven't changed and the same age-old

prejudices live on," said Tanyar, whose association includes about 4,000 members in 33 churches.

Turkey has been negotiating accession to the EU since 2005, but has faced opposition to its membership bid because of a lack of internal reforms, as well as persistent complaints from ethnic and religious minorities about being denied equal rights and protections in the country, most of whose 71.5 million inhabitants are Sunni Muslims.

In his letter to Turkish Premier Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Hammarberg said he welcomed recent government efforts to act against publications inciting hatred and hostility towards non-Muslims, and to comply with judgments by the European Court of Human Rights.

However, he added that "outstanding issues" remained to be tackled, including restrictions on training Christian clergy, and a lack of "objectivity and pluralism" in religious education that respected the rights of non-Muslim parents.

In an official reply, Turkey's EU ambassador, Daryal Batibay, said religious freedom had seen "positive developments," adding that his government had established "direct dialogue" with several Christian denominations, and was reviewing religious education and the insertion of religious affiliations on Turkish identity cards, which has been ruled a violation of rights by the European Court.

However, in the interview with ENI, Tanyar said the inclusion of a "religion box" on IDs still caused difficulties for Christians, adding that six Protestant pastors were currently under police protection after death threats.

The association chairman said Protestants were now receiving responses when they complained about the contents of schoolbooks, but added that the education directors had refused to remove a passage from one textbook for 12-year-olds, which branded Christian missionaries a "major danger to the country."

"The authorities know Turkey has to provide religious freedom as a democracy - but they don't like it," Tanyar told ENI. "We are much more proactive than other Christian groups in looking after our rights, and people are generally less fearful and more hopeful about the future. But government ministers know they will lose support if they show the slightest co-operation with Christian churches."

Among recent gestures, Erdogan ordered local authorities last May to "uphold the rights of the Christian and Jewish minorities" and "behave with respect towards their clergy," while the government returned several early medieval churches to Orthodox Christians and promised Turkish citizenship rights to Orthodox metropolitans serving with the Istanbul-based Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate.