

Christians in Turkey Face Harassment; Murder Trial Stalls

Though the horrific scale of the 2007 Malatya murders has not been repeated in Turkey's Protestant church, a recent report shows harassment continues to be a daily problem for the country's Christians and churches.

Discrimination, slander and attacks against churches were among the examples of ongoing harassment that the Turkish Association of Protestant Churches (TEK) recorded in 2010.

In an eight-page report published earlier this year, TEK's Committee for Religious Freedom and Legal Affairs outlined problems Protestants face. Turkish laws and "negative attitudes of civil servants" continue to make it nearly impossible for non-Muslims to establish places of worship, the committee reported. Three churches faced legal problems last year regarding their buildings, according to the report.

Missionary activities are still considered a national threat despite the existence of Turkish laws guaranteeing citizens the freedom to propagate and teach their faith, and children are victims of discrimination at school, according to the report. Though the Religious Education General Directorate for Higher Education and Training Committee allows non-Muslim students to stay out of religious classes, parents have reported cases in which they were not able to take their children out of such courses.

"After four years [since the Malatya murders], Turkey's religious freedoms have not improved as desired," said attorney Erdal Dogan. "Christians, Alevis [a Shiite sub-community] and people of other beliefs are still not protected by law. And people of other faiths apart from Muslims have no

legal status. Since racism is still prevalent in the context of freedom, discrimination in its turn has become a fact of life.”

About a third of Turks are estimated to be Alevis.

Turkey rose to 30th place in Open Doors’ 2011 World Watch List of nations in which persecution against Christians takes place, up from 35th place the previous year. The Christian support organization cited deteriorating conditions as the secular country applied some laws in discriminatory ways against Christians.

TEK estimates that there are up to 3,500 Protestant Christians in Turkey.

Malatya Trial Stalled

In the trial of the five primary suspects in the murder of three Christians in Malatya, plaintiff attorneys fear the departure of one of the three judges to a Supreme Court of Appeals post in Ankara could further stall the nearly four-year-old case.

The loss of Judge Eray Gurtekin, who had presided over the case since it began on Nov. 22, 2007, could threaten to set back the progress of the court that has been examining links between the killers and alleged masterminds, according to Dogan, a plaintiff attorney in the case. Gurtekin was appointed as a judge in the Supreme Court of Appeals in Turkey’s capital Ankara last month.

“In a three-member panel [of judges], the change of one is not really helpful,” said Dogan, “because just as the previous presiding judge had started to understand and pay close attention to the case file, a new judge came in his place. I hope he will catch on quickly.”

The new judge joined the Malatya hearings panel this month, and Dogan said there could be more changes in the panel.

The 12th Istanbul High Criminal Court is expected to hear the testimony of another witness on March 29, and the court is trying to locate two more witnesses in order to shed light on the Malatya murders.

On April 18, 2007, two Turkish Christians, Necati Aydin and Ugur Yuksel, and German Christian Tilmann Geske, were bound, tortured and then murdered at the office of Zirve Publishing Co., a Christian publishing house in Malatya. The suspects, Salih Guler, Cuma Ozdemir, Hamit Ceker, and Abuzer Yildirim, were arrested while trying to escape the scene of the crime, as was alleged ringleader Emre Gunaydin.

From the beginning of the court hearings, prosecuting lawyers have brought evidence to the court showing the five young suspects were connected to a wider plot to kill the three Christians as well as other key Christian leaders across Turkey. Known as the Cage Plan, the plot is believed to be part of the alleged Ergenekon “deep state” operation to destabilize the government.

The Cage Plan centers on a compact disc found in 2009 in the house of a retired naval officer. The plan, to be carried out by 41 naval officers, termed as “operations” the Malatya killings, the 2006 assassination of Catholic priest Andrea Santoro and the 2007 slaying of Hrant Dink, Armenian editor-in-chief of the weekly Agos.

Questioned by the judges, Varol Bulent Aral – suspected of being one of the people who planned the murders and linked the killers to the masterminds – said he wanted the court to find out who was supporting the Zirve Publishing Co. He added a cryptic remark to Tilmann Geske’s widow, Suzanne Geske, who continues to live in Malatya with her three children and regularly attends the murder hearings.

“I want to ask Suzanne, what business does a German have here?”

The judges finally threw Aral out of the courtroom for contempt of court when he told the judges: "You are in the clouds!"

Prosecuting lawyers still hope judges will join the Malatya case files to the Cage Plan case, which is being tried at an Istanbul court.

The threat of violence against Christians continues. Last week Turkish news sources reported that Istanbul police arrested two suspects, ages 17 and 18, accused of plotting to assassinate a priest on the European side of the city. The Istanbul Public Prosecutor's Office is examining their case.