

American Pastor Jailed Under Terrorism Charges

A Turkish judge sent Rev. Andrew Brunson to prison in Izmir Dec. 9, 64 days after the U.S. pastor and his wife, Norine, were detained on Oct. 7 under Interior Ministry deportation orders.

Although his wife was released on Oct. 19 and given an extended permit to remain in the country, Andrew Brunson has been held since Oct. 20 at the Harmandali Detention Center on the northern edge of Izmir.

The 48-year-old was transferred overnight on Dec. 8. to a counter-terrorism center before being brought before an Izmir court Dec. 9 for interrogation.

On Dec. 9, the American Protestant heard for the first time the allegations filed against him, which apparently prompted his arrest and lengthy detention. According to the officiating judge, the "terrorism" charges came from a "secret informant." The court ruled that the files on Brunson's case would continue to remain inaccessible to his lawyer, who had not been allowed to meet him until the Dec. 9 hearing.

Brunson's lawyer has confirmed that the court document released at the hearing charged her U.S. client with "membership in an armed terrorist organization." The judge specifically mentioned allegations that the pastor had links with the Fetullah Gulen movement, which is accused by Ankara of instigating a failed military coup against the Turkish government on July 15. The pastor is now incarcerated at Izmir's Sakran 3 Nolu T Tipi Prison.

In a wide-ranging crackdown to identify and prosecute the suspected coup plotters and their sympathizers, with the intention to prosecute them as "terrorists," the Turkish

authorities have suspended or jailed tens of thousands of judges, prosecutors, military personnel, journalists and educators on terrorism charges over the past five months.

Brunson and his wife, who have three children now studying in the U.S., have lived in Turkey for the past 23 years.

Previous update (Oct. 20):

Turkish police authorities holding an American Protestant couple in isolation for the past 13 days released the wife late last night (Oct. 19), but continue to hold her husband incommunicado in an Izmir detention facility.

Rev. Andrew Brunson and his wife Norine were refused contact with U.S. consular officials and lawyers since they were detained on Oct. 7., under Interior Ministry orders for deportation within 15 days on alleged “national security” grounds. To date, no reason for the expulsion order has been given to the couple, who are 20-year residents of Turkey.

Although initial attempts by members of the Izmir Resurrection Church to send in personal effects to their pastor and his wife were refused, this week officials accepted parcels of fresh clothing and medicine for the couple. But the police would not permit a Bible to be sent on to them.

It remained unclear whether Rev. Brunson would be deported or remain in custody. He was transferred to the Cigli Detention Center in the northern part of Izmir this morning.

Original story (Oct. 14):

Turkish officials in the coastal city of Izmir detained American Christians Andrew and Norine Brunson on Oct. 7, refusing ever since to allow daily requests for access to them by U.S. consular officials and lawyers.

According to authorities at the Migration Administration’s

detention facility in Izmir, the Turkish Interior Ministry had ordered the couple's deportation within 15 days. Specifically, the directive reportedly accused them of activities said to constitute a "national security risk."

When pressed five days later for details about this general accusation, the detention officials said they were "waiting for papers from Ankara" on the case.

Residents of Turkey for the past 20 years, the Brunsons are currently leading the Izmir Resurrection Church, a small Protestant congregation averaging 30 to 40 worshippers, located in the city's Alsancak district.

After filing a routine application in April to renew their residence visas, the Brunsons had received no response for the past six months. But when they arrived home on Oct. 7, they found a written summons requesting them to report with their passports to a local police station. On arrival, they were immediately taken into custody.

A lawyer asking to visit them was denied access and told to obtain an affidavit as his legal authorization. But when he returned with the document, officials claimed that the couple had already signed a statement, declaring they did not want a lawyer. The authorities refused to produce the written statement.

A lawyer acting on behalf of the Brunsons filed a petition to the Izmir governor yesterday (Oct. 12), protesting that the incommunicado stipulation against the American Christians was illegal under Turkish detention laws. A member of the Turkish Parliament has also made an inquiry on the handling of their detention.

Although an Izmir church leader confirmed that the U.S. Embassy in Ankara is reportedly "following the arrests," an embassy official declined any comment on the detentions to World Watch Monitor.

After five days, church friends trying to send in a change of clothing to the couple, who are in their late forties, continue to be rebuffed at the detention center.

A continuing pattern

The Interior Ministry has issued similar summary deportation orders against expatriate Christians living in Turkey over the past few years. But when their lawyers were given official access to their detained clients, as stipulated by law, the directive could be delayed. This allowed a temporary stay of deportation and a formal court appeal.

In such a recent turnaround, Canadian-American Christian David Byle was taken into custody in April, when the Interior Ministry denied his application to renew his residence visa and advised the immigration authorities to deport him as a “danger to public order.”

Byle has worked for years with a registered Bible Correspondence Course, helping educate the Turkish public about the Bible and organizing legal street outreaches.

Byle’s lawyer filed three cases against his arrest, deportation order and reentry ban. All now remain on hold because of the Turkish judicial upheaval, in which thousands of judges and prosecutors have been suspended over allegations of support for the Fetullah Gülen movement, accused of orchestrating the summer’s attempted military coup. But in the interim, until the cases are resolved, Byle continues to live in Turkey.

A similar process took place two years ago, when an American Protestant pastoring in southeast Turkey’s Gaziantep city for nine years was detained in September 2014 for imminent deportation under Interior Ministry orders. Although Patrick Jensen’s residence permit was cancelled, his lawyer’s intervention shortened his detention to only 30 hours, and a court hearing was set to hear his appeal over the ruling,

which Turkey's Association of Protestant Churches had protested as "absolutely arbitrary."

The Gaziantep Administrative Court's judicial decision two months later overturned the Interior Ministry's order, allowing Jensen to remain in the country.

Ironically, Jensen was refused entry on August 27 when he arrived at the Istanbul airport, returning from traveling abroad. The reason for his blacklisting is still unclear.

Still another U.S. citizen living in Turkey and involved in Christian ministry learned this past weekend while flying out of an Istanbul airport that his valid residence visa had been revoked. It was unclear whether he would be permitted to reenter Turkey if he returned on his round-trip ticket.

But apparently the option of judicial review is being circumvented in the Brunsons' deportation, since they have so far been refused the right to any legal counsel to prevent their forced removal from Turkey.

Under Turkey's current state of emergency, declared after the failed 15 July military coup, the government in Ankara has relatively free rein to implement policies and directives which appear to violate the principle of rule of law. Last week the emergency regulations were renewed for another three months, until mid-January 2017.

"They are never going to be happy with any foreigners doing Christian work in this country," one Turkish church leader told World Watch Monitor. "So we have to take these government actions in proportion, realizing there are so many countries in this region where expatriate Christians can't even go openly.

"There are quite likely touchy issues involved here," he said, referring to the flood of Syrian refugees and the Kurdish violence in the southeast, where many Christians are involved

in humanitarian aid.

So for expatriate Christians involved in church ministries in Turkey, routine residence visa renewal procedures now appear somewhat tentative. {eo}