

Islamic Nation Calls Christians 'National Security Risk,' Deports Them

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 (12 Oct.), 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 40s, 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 turn-around, 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 re-entry 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 27 Aug. 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 re-enter 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 July 15 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, realising 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, their routine residence visa renewal procedures now appear somewhat tentative. {eoa}

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