

Turkish President Refuses to Release Brunson: 'US Evangelist, Zionist Mentality Is Unacceptable'

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Wednesday slammed the US over its conduct regarding U.S. pastor Andrew Brunson, who is being tried for terrorism offenses in Turkey.

"Turkey has no problems related to [religious] minorities. Threatening language of the U.S. evangelist, Zionist mentality is unacceptable," Erdogan told journalists in parliament on Wednesday, Turkey's *Anadolu* agency reported.

Erdogan was responding to a charge made by Vice President Mike Pence last week that Brunson was "a victim of religious persecution."

The Turkish leader vowed to defy the U.S. and "continue on the path we believe in without the slightest concession to our freedom, sovereignty or judicial independence."

A Turkish court rejected an appeal Tuesday to end Brunson's house arrest. He is at the center of an escalating diplomatic row between Turkey and the U.S.

The court in Izmir also refused to lift a travel ban that prevents Brunson, 50, from leaving Turkey, ruling there was no change in the "strong criminal suspicion" against the pastor.

Brunson, who has lived in Turkey for more than two decades, was arrested in December 2016 on espionage and terror-related charges. He was jailed until released to home detention on July 25.

The evangelical Christian pastor denies any wrongdoing. He

faces a prison sentence of up to 35 years if convicted on both counts at the end of his ongoing trial.

President Donald Trump demanded Brunson's release and announced possible sanctions against Turkey last week. The Ankara government refused to back down and called on the U.S. to respect Turkey's judicial process.

"It is unacceptable for the United States to use threatening language against Turkey over a continuing judicial case," presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said after a Cabinet meeting.

"Turkey will never give up on its principled stance," Kalin added. He reiterated that Turkey would seek international arbitration if the US refused to deliver F-35 fighter jets in retaliation.

Brunson, who is originally from Black Mountain, North Carolina, led the Izmir Resurrection Church in Turkey. He was detained in the aftermath of a failed 2016 coup for allegedly supporting outlawed Kurdish rebels and the network led by Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen.

Turkey blames Gulen for the unrest, but the cleric denies involvement in the coup attempt. {eo}

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