

December 19, 2006

Via E-Mail and Regular Mail

The Honorable Ross Wilson
Ambassador to Turkey
American Embassy Ankara
110 Atatürk Blvd.
Kavaklıdere, 06100 Ankara – Turkey

Mr. Ambassador:

I am writing this letter in my capacity as National Commander of the Order of St. Andrew the Apostle, Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and for the more than 6 million Orthodox Christians who reside in the United States of America.

At what point does the abridgment of the rights of United States citizens by the government of Turkey warrant a strenuous rebuke and vigorous protest by the United States Government? We think that point has long come and that the State Department must not turn silent to a government who consistently acts in a fashion opposed to the most basic religious values and the most fundamental rights of citizens of the United States of America.

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The visit in Istanbul by the Roman Catholic Pope, Benedict XVI, to Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, was a historic event of great religious importance for the world over. It was viewed everywhere as a step towards reconciliation between the two ancient and apostolic Christian churches. Almost 200 United States citizens traveled to Turkey to witness the momentous event. Today, I have the unfortunate responsibility of reporting the harassment that we Americans endured as we came to witness this historic meeting.

Perhaps the conduct which best illustrates the oppressive harassment by the Turkish authorities of the religious rights of United States citizens occurred on the celebration of the services by the Pope and the Ecumenical Patriarch on November 29th and 30th. Archons and other faithful Orthodox Christians from the United States were forced to **turn in their passports** to Turkish

authorities before passing through a blockade and proceeding to the Ecumenical Patriarchate to attend the services, while many other Orthodox Christians were completely denied access to worship. Once inside the Church, Turkish police permeated the congregation and *physically blocked and bullied* worshippers in their attempts to receive communion and receive liturgical gifts from the revered clergy. In fact, the clergy had to plead and argue with the Turkish police, to allow the faithful to move towards the Altar and the Chalice.

But the harassment did not begin or end in the confines of our Patriarchal Cathedral and sanctuary. The following list records some of the acts of mistreatment. These examples provide yet more evidence of the oppression that the Ecumenical Patriarchate suffers at the hands of the Turkish government. This list is not all inclusive, but is indicative of our experience:

- On November 28th and 29th, press registration and the issue of press passes was disrupted by Turkish Authorities who forcibly closed our registration table and threatened to confiscate the press passes we had prepared for distribution to registered journalists.
- On three separate occasions, Turkish authorities attempted to close down the press office of the Holy See/Ecumenical Patriarchate which was directed and staffed by Archons of the Order of St. Andrew.
- On November 29th, Turkish authorities threatened to expel our staff from the press office, and take over the operation thereof.
- On the morning of November 29th, our technical staff discovered that all of the work server preferences on computer and communication systems in the press room had been remotely changed, causing the simultaneous failure of our wireless internet connections, and ADSL internet lines. Our Turkish vendor stated unequivocally that these problems could only be due to technical sabotage, as the preferences had been checked the previous evening and that morning, at which time all communication systems were working properly.
- On November 29th, Turkish authorities confiscated banners with images of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Benedict XVI which the Archons had hung at the entrance of the press office of the Holy See/Ecumenical Patriarchate.
- On the 29th of November, busses transporting Archons and other faithful Orthodox Christians for the Doxology service were kept from approaching the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Archons and other pilgrims were forced to walk approximately one mile to participate in the Doxology worship service at the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

- At the conclusion of the Doxology service on the 29th, these same passengers learned that Turkish authorities had ordered their busses to move even further away from the Ecumenical Patriarch. Archons and other faithful Orthodox Christians, many of whom are advanced in age, were forced to walk more than two miles through the dark streets of the Fenar district in order to board their busses and return to their hotel.
- Crucial Turkish vendors, including the caterer for the luncheon in honor of the Pope hosted by the Ecumenical Patriarch, were initially denied entrance into the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Ultimately, their access was restricted and delayed.
- On the 30th of November, busses bringing passengers for the Divine Liturgy were barred from approaching the Ecumenical Patriarchate again. Passengers were again forced to walk a great distance and turn in their passports before being admitted into the Ecumenical Patriarchate for worship services. Again, many Orthodox Christians were denied access all together.
- On November 29th and 30th, Members of the press bearing Turkish press credentials and press passes of Ecumenical Patriarchate were denied entrance into the Ecumenical Patriarchate even though they were named on a list of pre-approved press. This list was agreed upon by Turkish authorities and the staff of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's press office prior to the event. This seriously compromised media coverage of the exchange between Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Benedict XVI.
- On the 30th of November, an Archon attempting to secure admittance to the Ecumenical Patriarchate for approved press and faithful Orthodox Christians was forcibly removed from the premises and detained by Turkish authorities for approximately one hour.

In summary, Turkish authorities took concrete steps to disrupt the smooth operation and of the Papal visit. They attacked the press office of the Holy See/Ecumenical Patriarchate, harassed volunteer staff and paid vendors, and disrupted media coverage. Most alarming of all, they restricted Orthodox Christians' access to their church, making entrance to services and free movement in worship difficult and, for many, impossible.

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As you know, the Order of St. Andrew enthusiastically shares in Turkey's hope to enter the European Union, and actively advocates for the necessary changes within Turkey to realize that hope. The Order of St. Andrew has always been aware of Turkish policies that abridge the full and free operation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and other religious minorities, and yet the Order is confident that Turkey can become a nation in which people of all faiths may exercise their religion freely.

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We have expressed this confidence to policy makers in the United States and Europe, while advocating for the freedom of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in its historic home of Istanbul. However, I am saddened to say that from our experiences during the Papal visit, the members of the Order of St. Andrew have acquired a new understanding of Turkey's marginalizing and unfair treatment of Christians.

The outright harassment of members of the Order of St. Andrew, faithful Orthodox Christians, and the press has made the obstacles to Turkey's entrance to the European Union undeniably visible.

The Order of St. Andrew views these acts of harassment as religious oppression of United States citizens. We, however, refuse to lose hope that Turkey will fulfill its potential as a dignified and noble member of the European Union, and we continue to advocate for changes in policy and practice that will allow for the free exercise of religion for people of all faiths. In pursuit of this end, I request that you forward this letter of complaint to all relevant Turkish authorities, and insist these urgent issues of religious freedom be addressed as Turkey, a U.S. ally, works to find her place among the European nations.

As I close this communication, allow me to express the appreciation of the visiting pilgrims who had the great honor to be present at the dinner in honor of His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on December 1st. As Americans who believe in the First Amendment, we were quite pleased when you offered stirring words in support of religious freedom in Turkey and the Ecumenical Patriarch and his role as a "religious figure, statesman, advocate of understanding, respect and love among peoples, and friend..."

Wishing you and your family an Advent Season filled with abundant blessings and a New Year replete with peace and good health, I remain,

Sincerely,



Anthony J. Lamberakis, MD

Order of St. Andrew the Apostle, Archons of the Ecumenical Patriarchate
National Commander

Cc: The President of the United States

The Secretary of State

Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns