

CHAMPIONING RELIGIOUS MINORITY RIGHTS

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 **Keghart.com Board Editorial**, 10 May 2011

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At the gathering, on April 23, in the Coptic community centre in Mississauga, a suburb of Toronto, Mr. Harper said, "While we are thankful to live in a country that spares us such tests, we must not let our comfort be an excuse to shirk our commitment to the cause of freedom...That is why I am pleased to announce that a re-elected Conservative government will create a special Office of Religious Freedom."

The office, located within the Department of Foreign Affairs & International Trade, would monitor religious freedoms around the world, promote religious freedom as a key objective of Canadian foreign policy and advance policies and programs that support religious freedom around the world.

Mr. Harper added, "The office will call attention to the religiously persecuted and condemn their persecutors. It will signal to religious minorities everywhere that they have a friend in Canada."

Among the religious minorities persecuted, Mr. Harper mentioned the Copts in Egypt, the Baha'i in Iran, the Christian minorities in Iraq, the Ahmadiyya and Christian minorities in Pakistan. He didn't mention the Christians of Turkey.

The Republic of Turkey and its predecessor Ottoman Empire have a long tradition of persecuting Christian minorities. A mid-sized library can be filled with accounts of Turkish harassment,

persecution and extermination of Christian minorities.

Although the "modern" and "democratic" Republic of Turkey is a signatory to the Lausanne Treaty (1923), Ankara's policy since then has demonstrated Turkish government's signature, on this issue, is not worth the paper it's written on.

Article 38 of the Lausanne Treaty says, "The Turkish Government undertakes to assure full and complete protection of life and liberty to all inhabitants of Turkey without distinction of birth, nationality, language, race or religion."

Article 42 of the same treaty says, "The Turkish Government undertakes to grant full protection to the churches, synagogues, cemeteries and other religious establishments of the above-mentioned minorities..."

Pretty words. Meaningless words. Turks have a nice saying, "San salla başını, ben bilirim işimi." (You shake your head; I know my business, i.e. Say what you may, I know what to do).

In 2006 the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights condemned, in a 26-page brief,

Turkey's continued practice of Turkification it adopted in the early 20th century. The federation went on to say, "...non-Muslim minorities enjoy restricted property rights, face interference in the management of their foundations, and a ban on training their clergy."

In the name of Turkey's secular laws, authorities have for decades expropriated a vast number of Christian Church (Armenian, Assyrian, Greek, Syriac, etc.) properties. The Christians in Turkey are living under a shadow of fear and insecurity due to government policies and violent backlash by nationalist hardliners.

It might seem a redundant exercise to cite cases of Turkish persecution of Christians. However, it's worthwhile to mention some of the more recent outrages perpetrated against the Christians of Turkey.

A few years ago government land officials redrew the boundaries of the Syriac Church's Mor Gabriel Monastery on the Turkish-Syrian border. The new boundaries meant the loss of monastery lands. In addition, the local prosecutor initiated a court case against the monastery after the mayors of three neighboring villages complained that the monks were engaged in anti-Turkish activities and falsely claimed that the monks were illegally converting Moslem children to Christianity.

Built in 397 AD, Mor Gabriel is considered "second Jerusalem" by Syriacs. Once it had 2,000 monks and nuns. Now three monks, 14 nuns and a bishop reside in the monastery. The shrinking number of clergy, which holds true also for Armenian and Greek Churches, is a result of official Turkish government policy.

This is the way Ankara's racist and sleazy tactics work:

1. Close down seminaries or don't allow any to be opened
2. Closure of seminaries leads to a shortage of clergy
3. Shortage of clergy means there are few to officiate at churches
4. Voila! Since the churches don't have officiating clergy, the government has the right to confiscate

the building and the lands around it.

Daniel Gabriel, director, human rights, Syrian Universal Alliance in Sweden, has said, "There is a continued campaign to destroy the backbone of the Syriac people and close down the monastery ." When Ataturk took power, there were 250,000 Syriacs in the country. There are now 20,000.

Two years ago, Istanbul-based Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, told "Sixty Minutes" program of CBS that Orthodox Christians in "Turkey are treated like second-class citizens and they often feel crucified." The clergyman, who is the spiritual leader of 300 million Greek Orthodox faithful, is dismissed with contempt by Ankara. Following incessant persecution over many decades, the Greek population of Turkey has shrunk to 3,500.

Ankara's persecution of Christians encourages Turkish nationalists to take the law into their own hands. A few years ago Turkish hardliners kidnapped Orhan Picaklar, a pastor, and stoned his church. They also tried to kidnap his son and said that prostitutes and subversive elements were frequenting Picaklar's church. In fact, violent attacks against Christians have frightened many pastors and their families to the extent that they prefer not to go outdoors.

In Samsun, on the Black Sea coast, a Christian congregation was incredibly accused of channeling funds to Western powers, implanting agents in the region... to undermine Islam.

Then there was the torture and killing of a group of missionaries in Malatya in April 2007. The ultranationalists alleged that the churches were front for intelligence agencies, such as the CIA and Mossad.

In February 2006 Andrea Santoro, a Roman Catholic priest, was gunned down in his church near the Black Sea. The killer screamed "Allahu Akbar" before firing two bullets into Santoro's back as the clergyman knelt in prayer.

These criminal acts couldn't have taken place without the "wink-wink, nudge-nudge" sanction of the Turkish government.

Two years ago when construction workers began digging in the village of Aydinocak (Van region) to erect a building, they uncovered many human bones. When it was determined that the land had been an Armenian cemetery—thus forbidden to desecrate—the gendarmerie and the prosecutor suddenly discovered that the ancient Armenian cemetery had not been registered; therefore construction could proceed.

The United States Commission on International & Religious Freedom in its current annual report said, "This country's laws do not allow religious minorities to register as legal entities and act accordingly,

and the Armenian Patriarch in Turkey is deprived of the opportunity to act on behalf of a legal person."

The report added, "Religious hatred is displayed in 300 daily emails sent to the Patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Turkey and they attack against Christian clergy and religious minorities." These emails are presumably sent by ultra-nationalists and Islamists who get a pass from Ankara in their campaign to drive out Christians from Turkey.

There are 75 million Moslems and 120,000 Christians in Turkey. Yet the paranoid and racist Turkish government ("Turkey for Turks") feels threatened by 0.1% of its Christian citizens and is determined to either expel them or Turkify them.

Prime Minister Harper's government has demonstrated that it's not blowing bubbles in the air when it talks about helping religious minorities. In recent years it has reached out to resettle Iraqis (some of them Armenian) targeted as religious minorities. The government has also announced the extension of the program to 2013, by which time 20,000 Iraqi refugees will have been resettled in Canada. The Canadian government has also denounced the attacks on Copts and their religious institutions and has called on the Egyptian government to bring the perpetrators to justice. Ottawa has condemned the use of blasphemy laws, in Moslem countries, to harass, intimidate, arrest and sentence to death religious minorities.

We hope that when the commendable Office of Religious Freedom is up and running, the government will wholeheartedly champion the rights of the long-suffering and persecuted Christians of Turkey.

