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TURKEY: One year after Malatya murders, time to address the causes

By Güzide Ceyhan,

Turkey's Protestants are this week commemorating the first anniversary of the murders of three Protestants - Necati Aydin, Tillman Geske and Ugur Yüksel – in Malatya. Güzide Ceyhan, a Turkish Protestant, in a personal commentary for Forum 18, notes that Turkey's Alliance of Protestant Churches described 2007 as a "dark year" for their community. She says little has changed to give greater protection for the religious freedom of small religious communities, with some hiring private security companies or locking their doors during worship services. Ceyhan argues that dialogue with all religious communities and non-believers must begin so that the State's claim of being "equally close to all religions" becomes a reality; long-term educational efforts must be initiated to foster pluralism and the equality of all citizens; and the state must urgently take steps to remove imminent threats of attacks on smaller communities, as well as punish those who have committed attacks. If Turkey does not do this, she argues, "we will not have started to genuinely address the causes of the three murders."

Turkish Protestants are this week commemorating the deaths one year ago of Necati Aydin, Tillman Geske and Ugur Yüksel. On 18 April 2007, the three - two Turks and a German national - were brutally murdered in their office in the south-eastern town of Malatya. The murders left behind grieving families, a community in fear and a country with mixed emotions about the incident.

The trial of the five alleged killers of Aydin, Geske and Yucel – finally begun late last year in Malatya – drags on. But it raises numerous questions as to who else was involved in planning or inciting this terrible attack (see F18News 29 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1053).

In its January 2008 report of violations of the human rights of the Protestant community, Turkey's Alliance of Protestant Churches described 2007 as a "dark year" for the community. The motivation to compile such a report was to draw attention to the community's problems and provide concrete information for those concerned for the protection of human rights. Sadly, Turkish media coverage of the report was minimal.

The report includes a long list of incidents of alleged violations of human rights and provides a chilling insight into the hardships and attacks this group is subjected to.

First of all, it is interesting to note that all the incidents were committed by non-State actors, not by the State as such. This of itself indicates enormous societal intolerance against Protestants in Turkish society. Yet this does not relieve the State of its obligations to protect the life, liberty and freedom of religion or belief of its citizens.

Secondly, as well as the horrendous murders in Malatya, the list includes many other attacks against members of this community or their places of worship. These include seven attacks on church buildings (ranging from attempts to burn the building to throwing stones), four threats to kill church leaders, one plot to murder a church leader, and two attempts to kidnap a church leader and his 11-year-old son.

The report stresses that this list contains only those incidents where the victims were willing to come forward. It also acknowledges that many other incidents occur, where people are not prepared to make a public complaint for fear of being exposed.

The third striking feature of the report is that, with few exceptions, the authorities have not been able to find the perpetrators. The report calls on the Government and State institutions to take a proactive attitude to the "lynching campaign" directed against the Protestant community, whose members are mainly people who have converted to Christianity from Islam.

But it is not only Protestants who have suffered violence. This year a Catholic priest, Fr Adriano Franchini, was stabbed by the 20-year-old R.B. in Izmir, though thankfully the priest survived. The statement of R.B. at the start of his trial on 9 April is a striking testimony to the causes of violence against Christians in Turkey (see F18News 29 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1053). He testified that he had observed that after the murders in 2006 of the Catholic priest Fr Andrea Santoro and in 2007 and of the Armenian Turkish journalist Hrant Dink, the alleged killers were received

as heroes (see eg. Compass Direct 6 February 2007

<http://www.compassdirect.org/en/display.php?page=news&lang=en&length=long&idelement=4764&backpage=archives&critere=&countryname=Turkey&rowcur=0>. R.B. thought he would become a hero like them.

R.B. also said that he was inspired by the popular television series "The Valley of Wolves", which in some episodes portrayed Christian missionaries in Turkey as enemies of the nation and (see F18News 29 November 2007

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1053). His statement confirms that he sees his act as a commitment to nationalism (see Hurriyet 9 April 2008 <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/haber.aspx?id=8661073&tarih=2008-04-09>).

A number of church leaders had already complained about the broadcast of this series both to the public prosecutor and to the RTUK (Radio Television Supervisory Organ), regarding it as incitement to hatred. However, the prosecutor did not regard it as constituting a crime, while the RTUK took a long time to issue a warning to the producers and the channel which broadcast it (see Hurriyet 11 April 2008 <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/magazin/anasayfa/8659378.asp?gid=222&sz=62545>).

The current President of the Alliance of Protestant Churches, Zekai Tanyar, warns that in the past year Protestants, particularly in smaller cities and towns, have felt intimidated by rising intolerance against their community. He says they are reluctant to go to the police when they receive anonymous threats or face what can only be described as discrimination in their dealings with public authorities: they fear they will only draw more attention to themselves and, in any case, will not succeed. Only in some cases where there have been serious attacks on church buildings and serious threats to the lives of church leaders, as referred to in the Alliance's report, has the State provided protection.

A number of churches have instead hired private security companies, while others make sure they lock the doors during worship services. While they are thankful for the cases where the State has provided protection, they are also troubled by the constant reminder of the need for such protection against potential attacks. Inevitably, questions are raised. Why is police protection needed for a place of worship, where it ought to be possible for the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief to be exercised without interference by anyone? Why should a church leader need round-the-clock protection wherever they are? How long will such protection be needed? Increased worries about security have also frightened church members when coming to worship services with their families and children.

According to Tanyar, the Protestant Churches' concerns and expectations are no different than in 2006, before the Malatya murders, as the conditions have not changed. He acknowledges that the necessary changes will need a long time to take effect. Securing freedom of religion or belief for all belief communities requires work on many different fronts; it has political, legal and societal aspects. Creating conditions conducive for a tolerant society - where not only Protestants, but a wide range of groups that are distinct from the dominant or majority of the population will be tolerated - will take a long time.

Tanyar also notes that, for many months, the Government has been held up by successive crises in domestic politics, such as the problems around lifting the ban on the wearing of headscarves by female university students and the recent lawsuit aiming to close down the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Like many other reforms, legal steps that need to be taken for better protection of everyone's freedom of religion or belief are postponed, while the government deals with what it regards as more urgent matters. However, concrete steps must be taken in this direction, otherwise this goal can never be achieved.

But despite the progress that has been made in the legal sphere, even the steps that have been taken are sadly incomplete. The long-promised new Foundations Law does not allow Muslim or non-Muslim religious communities to legally exist as themselves, and so they are not themselves allowed to own their own places of worship. As Dilek Kurban of the Istanbul-based TESEV Foundation noted, the Law is "incompatible with the principle of freedom of association, which is guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights, the Constitution and the Treaty of Lausanne" (see F18News 13 March 2008 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1100).

Tanyar is clear that, as a community, the Protestant Churches do not wish to become simply a tool for the political ends of various groups. In this context he points to politicians who exaggerate the level of missionary activities and numbers of those who have converted to Christianity as a result of these activities. Such politicians do this to reinforce criticism of the Government which has enacted legislation making spreading a religion a legal activity.

Amid all these debates, it seems that the small Protestant community's own voice is not heard by the Turkish public and state officials. There is no forum or tool whereby the community could effectively respond to allegations, or take part in a meaningful discussion, involving all Turkish citizens, that might contribute to clarification and allow for the Protestant perspective to be heard. In addition it lacks the resources to respond to everything that is said in public about it. The voice of Turkey's other smaller religious communities also needs to be heard by our fellow Turks.

While it is difficult to remain hopeful about what the future might hold for Turks in general and religious or belief communities in particular, it is vitally important to continue to strive for better protection of freedom of religion or belief. In this context I believe four concrete steps which would have the effect of better protection for all belief communities are essential.

The first step in the right direction would be for relevant state officials and institutions to engage in dialogue with leaders of believers of both religions that have existed in Turkey for centuries and those groups that are new. This would of course also include atheists and agnostics, as freedom of religion or belief is also a right for non-believers. Such a dialogue would enable individuals and communities to voice the difficulties they encounter in the exercise of their right to freedom of religion or belief. It would also send a strong message to Turkish society that the secular State is "equally close to all religions", as the authorities like to proclaim. Such a dialogue would also enhance the prestige and societal acceptance of groups that now face intolerance.

The vital second step would be to engage in long-term educational efforts to foster pluralism, the equality of individuals with different religions and beliefs, and a culture of democracy that would encourage and teach discussion of different ideas without resorting to violence. This would also include reforms in public education of religion which would bring it up to a standard reflecting true freedom of religion for all non-Muslim groups, as well as various groups within Islam such as the Alevi (see F18News 29 November 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1053). Extreme nationalism is a major obstacle to this within the educational system (see F18News 26 July 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=817).

Thirdly, there is in Turkey great controversy around the term "missionary activity." Some use it as a negative term, while others recognise that everyone being able to share their beliefs in a non-coercive way is inseparable from everyone's freedom of religion and belief. In 2005 a parliamentary motion was brought to the Ministry of Interior about missionary activities in Turkey. The response of the then Minister of Interior Abdulkadir Aksu named three groups as engaging in missionary activity: Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is. He stated that this activity is watched closely in the interests of national security - even though this is in international law an unacceptable reason to limit freedom of religion and belief. Sadly, such comments are common from both politicians and officials (see F18News 10 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=990.) So Turkish society needs to discuss what is meant by "missionary activity": if it is different from exercising one's religion or belief, and maybe examine what is proper and improper proselytism. It is my opinion that Turkey would gain much from a genuine public debate on this, based firmly upon respect for pluralist democracy and tolerance.

Finally, the fourth important step – and one that needs to be taken immediately - is for the state to enact measures to remove imminent threats of attacks against places of worship and religious leaders. Doubtless finding and punishing the perpetrators of previous attacks would have a deterrent effect on those who contemplate further such attacks. The authorities must strongly condemn such threats and attacks and do their utmost to enforce laws protecting members of belief communities who are vulnerable to such attacks. It is important that such attacks are condemned by the whole of society, so that the perpetrators will not have the perception that they will be received as heroes by a significant group in society.

If Turkey wishes to be seen as a republic genuinely committed to a secular pluralist democracy, it is necessary for our government to: have an open public dialogue with all religious communities, as well as non-believers; initiate long-term educational efforts to foster pluralism and the equality of all citizens; have a public discussion on what missionary activity actually means in a pluralist democracy; and, most urgently, take steps to remove imminent threats of attacks against places of worship and religious leaders, as well as punish those who have committed attacks. For if we do not, we will not have started to genuinely address the causes of the three murders whose first anniversary we are marking this week. (END)

- Güzide Ceyhan, a Turkish Protestant, contributed this commentary to Forum 18 News Service <http://www.forum18.org>. Commentaries are personal views and do not necessarily represent the views of F18News or Forum 18.

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