

Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europa Newsletter

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Working visit by ABTTTF to Brussels



The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTTF) made a working visit to the heart of European Union, Brussels, on 8 March 2017. Within the scope of the working visit President of the ABTTTF, Halit Habip Oğlu accompanied by ABTTTF Head Office Manager, K. Engin Soyılmaz met with European Parliament deputy members (MEPs); member of Hungarian minority in Slovakia, Pal Csaky (EPP, Slovakia), member of Hungarian minority in Romania, Csaba Sogor (EPP, Romania), member of Russian minority in Latvia, Tatjana Zdanoka (Greens/EFA, Latvia), member of Swedish minority in Finland, Nils Torvalds (ALDE, Finland) and member of German minority in Italy, Herbert Dorfmann (EPP, Italy), and the Director of European Network Against Racism (ENAR) of which ABTTTF is also

the member, Michael Privat.

Current developments regarding Western Thrace Turks conveyed

Within the scope of the meetings conducted during the working visit while current developments related to Western Thrace Turks were conveyed, issues of collaboration for 2017 were also addressed. President of ABTTTF, Halit Habip Oğlu stated that the Greek Government would put into practice a pilot project implementation which envisage a Western Thrace Turk, graduate of a higher education institution in Greece acquiring languages of Turkish and Greek to work together with a Greek kindergarten teacher at six state kindergartens in the region where children of Western Thrace

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Turkish community live. ABTTF President reported that with this initiative the Turkish community's demand for having bilingual minority schools would insistently be ignored and educational autonomy will have once again been interfered.



Habip Oğlu who stated that the muftis selected by the Western Thrace Turkish society are yet not recognized, he also expressed in the light of recent developments that the application regarding selection and right after appointment of muftis by religious officials who were recruited as civil servants on contract pursuant to "240 İmam Law" aims at gradually abolishing religious autonomy at large.



Habip Oğlu pointed out that racist and discriminative discourses aiming at Western Thrace Turks persist. He also stated that a recent example for these

discourses is the explanation given by the President of the Hellenic Basketball Federation, Giorgos Vasilakopoulos regarding the Hellenic Basketball Cup final match where Giorgos Vasilakopoulos informed that a decision was made not to hold the aforementioned match in Xanthi unlike the previous planning due to the concerns that Western Thrace Turks



would create violence during the final match.

A pilot project implementation in six public kindergartens in Western Thrace

Halit Habip Oğlu: "Our demand is very clear that we want bilingual minority kindergartens within the minority schooling system."



The Institute of Educational Policies under the Ministry of Education of Greece declared that they would carry out a pilot project which envisages that a bilingual minority member, graduated from one of the higher education institutions in Greece, would work with a teacher in a kindergarten class in public schools in six provinces where children belonging to the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace live.

go the public kindergartens since there is no permit for minority kindergartens in the country. The institute declared that the project, which will be implemented in 6 schools at the initial stage, would be expanded into 12 kindergartens in the next academic year and further noted that necessary proposals after the assessment of the results of the pilot program would be presented to the Ministry at the end of the academic year.

According to the statement published by the Institute, the pilot project would be implemented in the remaining part of the academic year in six public kindergartens for an easy adaptation of the children to kindergartens, where minority children have no option than to

Halit Habip Oğlu, President of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) said: "The pilot project, which would bring that a member of the minority, who speaks Turkish and Greek

will work together with the teacher in the six public kindergartens located in villages where the Western Thrace Turkish Minority live, shows that our minority's demand for bilingual minority school is insistently being ignored. Despite all the interventions by the Greek state and governmental authorities, our minority is autonomous in fields of education and religion. Therefore, we want from the Greek authorities to allow the minority to open its bilingual minority kindergartens within the minority schooling system, not a project which would allow a minority member to work with the Greek teacher in the public kindergartens. This demand is so clear! We demand our right to have education in mother tongue at the pre-school level with no intervention to the autonomous structure in education and want the establishment of minority kindergartens where our minority children have bilingual education in Turkish and Greek".

Scenario prepared for abolishing our religious autonomy is in application step by step!

Dear Western Thrace Turks,

600-year-old Çelebi Sultan Mehmet Mosque, Beyazıt Mosque in other words, the first mosque constructed by the Ottoman Empire in Europe was destroyed completely in internal parts and on the wooden roof. Ottoman heritage almost disappeared after the fire at the mosque that was closed for worship and has been under restoration works for two years.

Before this sad event, the masjid in Didymoteicho belonging to the Didymoteicho Muslims Educational and Cultural Association was closed down on grounds that it lacks a separate working permit. And before the event in Didymoteicho, the masjid inside the Imathia Muslims Education, Culture and Sports Association, an association established by Western Thrace Turks who migrated from Western Thrace to Alexandria (Gida), a district in the province of Veria-Imathia (Karaferre), was closed down for the same reason that it did not have a separate working permit. Recently, the prosecutor and police made a search upon a denouncement at the mosque in the village of Iliopetra (Göynüklü), a minority village in Xanthi on 28 March. During the search two unlicensed guns, a muffler and bullets belonging to these guns were found in the backpack in the minaret of the mosque.

As you would recall, there were news on the media during the first days of January regarding the demand for resignation of appointed muftis Meço and Şinikoğlu to make the imams at the state schools select muftis. And, in meanwhile two separate cases were filed against our muftis of Xanthi and Komotini with the charge of usurpation of the Office of the Mufti. In the panel organized in March in Athens, muftis(appointed) were questioned for their sharia powers, and it was stated that authorities of the appointed muftis are not questioned as regards family and inheritance law for the Muslims living in Western Thrace and the decisions they make are not controlled by relevant authorities. Following this conference, according to the declaration made by

governmental authorities a commission has been established with the aim to modernize offices of muftis. However, there is nobody from Western Thrace Turks within this commission!

When you read about all developments above have you recognized something? All these recent developments are related to our "religion". What do you think we can infer from all these incidents? The scenario drafted long time ago for abolishing our religious autonomy is now being implemented step by step. Don't you think this much "coincidence" is too much?

We prepared a letter through listing all the incidents related to these "coincidences" recently happened in the field of religion. As ABTTF, we sent this letter to many senior and high-level people serving in international organizations and requested them to pay attention to the subject matter and asked for their help. Among those organizations only one of them showed its reaction against this situation. And that was the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN).

FUEN, with the press release it issued, condemned appearance of Ahmet Mete, Elected Mufti of Xanthi, in front of the court on 20 June 2017 in Thessaloniki for having been accused of usurpation of the office of mufti. Within the same explanation, FUEN reacted to the issue of filing a case against İbrahim Şerif, Elected Mufti of Komotini by the office of prosecutor again for usurpation of the office. FUEN condemned the recent judicial proceedings turning out to be a political tool of intimidation and oppression and announced that FUEN will be the follower of the cases against our muftis (<https://www.fuen.org/tr/haberler/single/article/condemnation/>).

FUEN took the issue of legal proceedings as a tool of intimidation and oppression against Western Thrace Turks also to the United Nations Human Rights Council. Our country Greece was so disturbed by this explanation



that it pointed me as a target as FUEN's Vice-President and responded in a very rude and non-diplomatic behaviour.

Greece which blamed FUEN for being an NGO serving the Turkish government displayed me as a person that serves for Turkish foreign policy and expressed that I am an "iron ball" on the feet of FUEN. Can you believe, Greece used exactly this phrase in the reply it submitted to the UN Human Rights Council!

Our country devoid of diplomacy and reality impeached me and FUEN severely for working for and supporting Western Thrace Turks. When you read the responses of Greece you will not only see how our country is devoid of reality but also how annoyed it is at FUEN advocating the rights of Western Thrace Turks (http://ap.ohchr.org/Documents/sdpage_e.aspx?b=10&se=184&t=2).

Whatever Greece, our country says or does, we go on our own way. It is apparent that our country moves step by step towards abolishing the religious autonomy. We need to be careful at this point and without another fait accompli with all the instruments in hand we must keep our clear stance regarding mufti problem, do the same everywhere to the extent it is possible.

Unless we deter and surrender our country will learn some day not to make a step for us despite us, it will move with us and consider our demands. We want to believe in this and we will continue with our efforts to make this happen.

Sincerely,

Halit Habip Oğlu
ABTTF President

ABTTF attends panel on “Sharia and Mufti are Questioned”



Institution of mufti discussed at the panel organized in the region of Western Thrace in Greece

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) participated in a panel on "Sharia and Mufti are Questioned" on 13 March 2017 in Athens organized by Center for European Constitutional Law - Themistokles & Dimitris Tsatos Foundation (CECL). At the panel attended by Fatma Ahmetcik, member of ABTTF International Affairs and Lobbying Group, Mustafa Mustafa and İlhan Ahmet, Western Thrace Turkish deputies who are member of the Greek Parliament were speakers and the Deputy Hüseyin Zeybek was the member of the audience.

The mufti attributed to mandate of judicature in marriage, divorce and inheritance

At the panel that received high attention Prof. Dr. Hristos Rozakis was the chair of the session. Other speakers of the panel



were Yorgos Kalanci, Secretary General of Religious Affairs of Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, Kostas Gunaris, Ex-President of Bar of Xhanti and Yannis Ktistakis, Faculty Member of Thrace Dimokritos University. The panelists while attributed to the mandates of judicature of the mufti and application of sharia in their presentations, they articulated that the (appointed) muftis' mandates in the field of family and inheritance law are not questioned and the decisions taken by the muftis are not supervised.

İlhan Ahmet, PASOK deputy from Rhodope who represented Western Thrace Turks, had the floor at the panel



and emphasized that due to terrorist groups like DAESH Islam religion is treated unrightfully in worldwide and stated that the application present in the Western Thrace is not sharia but a social law and mistakes in the application could be corrected if and only through the dialogue to be established with Western Thrace Turks. And Mustafa Mustafa, SYRIZA deputy from Rhodope implied that solutions for the problems experienced about the mufti are ignored by many lawyers and scientists and he added there is a need for correcting the religious law in enforcement in the Western Thrace and early marriages and alimony payment following divorce cause problems.

A written statement to the United Nations Human Rights Council by ABTTF

In its written statement to the United Nations, ABTTF raised the problems of the Turkish minority of Western Thrace on the Mufti issue and the recent developments on this.

The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) submitted a written statement titled “The freedom to elect their own religious leader and the long-lasting problem about mufti in Greece” to the 34th regular session of the United Nations Human Rights Council held in Geneva, Switzerland from February 27th and March 24th, 2017.

In its written statement, ABTTF noted that the legal status of the Turkish minority of Western Thrace is based on the Treaty of Lausanne and further added that the minority has the right to establish, manage and control its own religious institutions and to practice its own religion freely therein.

ABTTF mentioned in details historical background of the Mufti issue and noted that in violation of the 1913 Athens Treaty and the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, muftis in Komotini, Xanthi and Didymoteicho are appointed by the Presidential Decree of 24 December 1990. ABTTF added that the Turkish minority of Western Thrace consequently elected their own muftis, but they were not recognized by Greek authorities and that they were prosecuted and even were sentenced to prison in charge of illegal use of religious symbols.

ABTTF noted that there is a duality today in Western Thrace, the Muftis appointed by the State and the Muftis elected by the Turkish minority and added that under a law adopted in 2013, known as 240 Imam law, the government decided to



appoint 240 Islamic religious instructors to teach Islam to the children belonging to the Turkish minority in Greek-language public primary and secondary schools and mosques in Western Thrace under the auspices of the government-appointed muftis. ABTTF also mentioned that the term of the Deputy Mufti (appointed) in Didymoteicho and another deputy was appointed until the permanent appointment of the Mufti. ABTTF further noted that according to comments in the media the Greek government demands resignation of appointed Mufti of Rhodope and appointed Mufti of Xanthi in order to make ad hoc appointments until the election of the Muftis by religious

instructors hired in the public schools in the region of Western Thrace under Law 4115/2013 and that the Greek government would then appoint these persons as the Muftis for Rhodope, Xanthi and Didymoticho which would be a clear violation of the religious autonomy granted by international treaties.

ABTTF emphasized in its written statement that the freedom of religion of the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace is clearly violated and called the Greek government to act in accordance with the 1913 Athens and the 1923 Lausanne treaties and to allow the Turkish minority to elect their own muftis and to recognize the elected muftis. ABTTF called upon Greek authorities to repeal Law 4115/2013, known as 240 Imam Law and to establish a formal mechanism for dialogue between governmental authorities and the Turkish minority.

For the full statement by ABTTF submitted to the UN Human Rights Council 34th Regular Session: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G17/035/60/PDF/G1703560.pdf?OpenElement>

Parallel report from ABTTF for the U.S. 2016 Human Rights Report on Greece



The Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) prepared a report with comments and responses to the U.S. 2016 Greece Human Rights Report regarding the issues of Western Thrace Turks and conveyed the report to the U.S Department of State and to other related diplomatic missions. In its parallel report, ABTTF, both elaborated on the issues that were elucidated superficially and deficiently and conveyed information about the recent developments in the region.

ABTTF: Allegation that "Western Thrace Turks are imposing pressures on Pomaks and Roma" is unrealistic!

In response to the report in which problems of Western Thrace Turks were covered partially with the expression "Muslim minority in Thrace", ABTTF

noted that ethnic identity of the Muslim minority, of which its minority status had been defined with Lausanne Treaty, was explicitly stated Turkish the population exchange treaty. In response to the assertions that Pomaks and Roma within the Muslim minority in Thrace were subjected to the pressure by the "Turkish speaking community", ABTTF underlined that this assertion does not reflect the reality.

In the Bekir Ousta group of cases if Greece does not take a concrete step the Committee of Ministers shall take a second interim resolution

ABTTF stated that the associations belonging to Western Thrace Turks with the word "Turkish" in their names are closed down and new associations are not registered, and it articulated that

Greece insistently does not apply the verdicts despite the fact that it was found unjust in three different cases known to be Bekir Ousta group of cases which were brought to the European Court of Human Rights. ABTTF informed of the last examination by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe was held in March 2017 and stated that if Greece does not take concrete steps yielding to a result until September 2017, the Committee of Ministers would then take a second interim resolution.

Juridical proceedings against representatives of Western Thrace Turks have turned into an instrument for threatening and intimidating the community

Regarding police's excessive authority, ABTTF expressed that juridical proceedings for the representatives of



the Western Thrace Turk have turned into an instrument for threatening and intimidating the community and criticized that detaining of İsmet Kadı, Mayor of Iasmos (Yassıköy) Municipality by heading off him upon the instruction of the police. In its parallel report, ABTTF indicated that Ahmet Mete, Elected Mufti of Xanthi and İbrahim Şerif, Elected Mufti of Komotini being condemned for usurpation of the office of mufti is a message desired to be given to the community at large. ABTTF expressed that juridical proceedings started within the scope of accusations against the President and the Vice President of Friendship, Equality, Peace (FEP) Party, which is the representative of the Western Thrace Turks in the political field have an intention to threaten the Turkish community living in the region.

With a unilateral action, the Greek Government is preparing for the complete abolishment of religious autonomy with the pretext of providing solution for the Mufti issue

As a response to the report in which it is
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stated the Muftis are empowered with sharia powers in the fields of inheritance and civil law, ABTTF indicated that the right of the Western Thrace Turks to elect their own religious leaders was granted to them by international treaties and has been usurped by the Greek Government since 1991. ABTTF underlined that the muftis exercising the sharia powers today are the ones appointed by the Greek state. Conveying the recent developments about the muftis, ABTTF informed about its concern that the commission which has been recently established with the aim to modernize Mufti offices includes no one from Western Thrace Turks. ABTTF underlined that the state is unilaterally preparing for abolishing the religious autonomy.

The educational autonomy of the Western Thrace Turks is disregarded

Under discrimination section, ABTTF indicated that the autonomous structure in education is destroyed and criticized that there is only one secondary school in each of the provinces of Rhodope and Xanthi despite that the population of the

Western Thrace Turks are dense in these provinces. Nevertheless, ABTTF noted although the Western Thrace Turks are autonomous in education, number of minority schools in the region is decreased as a result of the application of closing down the schools with low number of students for economic reasons and that this application also included minority primary schools.

ABTTF reported physical and verbal attacks against the Western Thrace Turks

ABTTF criticized that hate-motivated physical and verbal attacks against the Western Thrace Turks were not covered by the report and reported separately attacks happened in 2016 and between the period January-April 2017. Within this framework, ABTTF along with other assaults, conveyed in detail the attack perpetrated by deputies of neo-Nazi Golden Dawn Party to an event organized by the ABTTF in Brussels in March 2016 and the attack to an event organized by the FEP Party in Athens in December 2016.

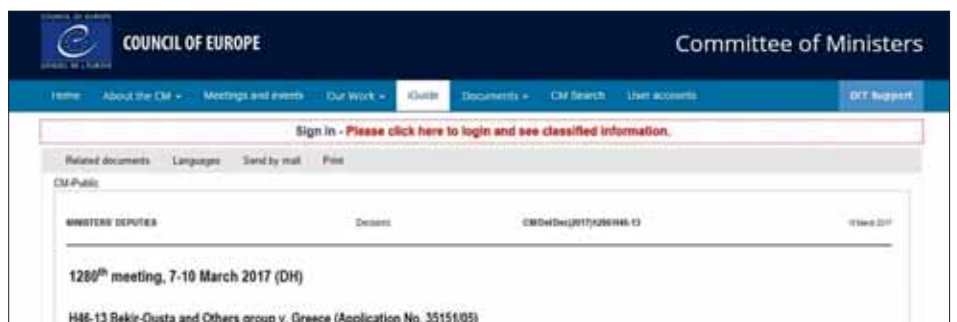
Warning to Greece by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe

The Committee of Ministers shall take a second interim decision if Greece does not take a step until September 2017 so as to achieve tangible progress for the implementation of ECtHR judgments.

The Council of Europe held its first meeting of the year on 7-10 March 2017, in keeping with the supervisory role of the Committee of Ministers on the implementation of European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) judgments. As a result of the review carried out at its 1280th meeting on 7 March 2017, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe criticized Greece for not achieving any results in the implementation of the three ECtHR judgments on violations of freedom of association of the Western Thrace Turks. The Council decided to prepare an interim decision about Greece in case a tangible progress is not secured until the review to take place in September 2017.

The Committee of Ministers asked Greece to take legislative steps for the re-opening on the merits of the proceedings of the three associations

ECtHR in its first verdict of October 2007 related to the case of Evros Minority Youth Association (case of Bekir Ousta and others) decided that Athens breaches the article 11 of the European Convention of Human Rights on freedom of association and assembly. And on 27 March 2008 ECtHR ordered that Greece breaches the right to assembly and association regarding the case of Xanthi Turkish Union (case of Xanthi Turkish Union and others) where



the association was closed because of the word "Turkish" in its name and the case of Cultural Association of Turkish Women of Rhodope where the mentioned association was not registered by relevant courts (case of Emin and others).

The Committee of Ministers has been following implementation of three ECtHR judgments on freedom of association by Greece under the name of cases of Bekir Ousta and his group since 2008. Owing to the fact that Greece does not implement the decisions persistently an interim decision was made in June 2014 and ECtHR requested from Greek authorities to present a concrete calendar for implementation of ECtHR judgments.

At the last review held on March 7th, the Committee of Ministers discussed recent developments regarding Bekir Ousta group of cases. The Committee of Ministers noted with interest the establishment of the mechanism for the implementation of the European Court's judgments. Nevertheless, the

Committee of Ministers criticized Greece that, apart from the establishment of this mechanism, no further tangible results have been achieved in the implementation of the individual measures in this group of cases since its last examination by the Committee of Ministers in March 2016.

In consideration of the time elapsed following the ECtHR judgments in all three cases, the Committee of Ministers asked from Greek authorities to take legislative measures in the context of the new mechanism, either by allowing the re-opening of proceedings in civil matters or by changing the procedure for registration of associations. The Committee of Ministers asked Greece to take legislative measures to allow the reopening of proceedings in civil matters which would allow to re-examination on the merits in light of the Court's judgments.

For the related decision of the Committee of Ministers please follow the link

https://search.coe.int/cm/pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016806faaa2.

Condemnation by FUEN for the attitude of the Greek authorities against the elected Muftis of Western Thrace Turks

FUEN expressed its strong support to the elected Mufti of Xanthi Ahmet Mete and the elected Mufti of Komotini İbrahim Şerif.

The Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), of which the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) is an ordinary member, informed in its press release FUEN is deeply concerned that the recent judicial investigations against the representatives of the Turkish community in Western Thrace have turned out to be an instrument for political intimidation and pressure. FUEN also noted the elected Mufti of Xanthi Ahmet Mete was accused of usurpation of the Office of Mufti and will stand trial on 20 June 2017 in Thessaloniki, and similarly the public prosecutor's office has filed a suit against the elected Mufti of Komotini İbrahim Şerif for "usurpation of the Mufti Office".

In the press release, FUEN also denoted the public prosecutor's office in Xanthi has filed a suit against Ahmet Mete and the Imam of Glafki (Gökçeşinar) for their actions during the funeral in the village of Glafki (Gökçeşinar) on 14 July 2016 of a young person belonging to the Turkish community who died while performing his military service in the Greek army, and by command of the public prosecutor's office, the elected Mufti of Komotini İbrahim Şerif was invited to the police headquarters to take delivery of his court file on 16 March 2017.

FUEN expressed it regrets that the right of the Turkish community in Western Thrace to select its own religious leaders has been usurped by the Greek government through the appointment of



Muftis by the state since 1990, and stated the Turkish community members reject the appointed muftis and elected Muftis as their religious leaders in Komotini and Xanthi, however, the Greek state does not recognize the Muftis who were elected by the Turkish community members and even, the elected muftis in the past were prosecuted and sentenced to prison for the illegal use of religious symbols. FUEN also attributed to the issue that along with the Eastern Orthodox Church as the prevailing religion in Greece, the Jewish Central Board or the Catholic and Protestant Church are free to elect its own religious leaders in Greece.

FUEN calling on the Greek authorities

not to harm by no means the autonomous structure of the Turkish community in accordance with the Athens Treaty of 1913 and its Third Protocol, stated: "FUEN condemns the attitude of the Greek authorities and expresses its strong support to the elected Mufti of Xanthi Ahmet Mete and the elected Mufti of Komotini İbrahim Şerif. In strong solidarity with the Turkish community, FUEN will continue to monitor the cases of Ahmet Mete and İbrahim Şerif, and will consider sending a delegation as observers to their trials".

For the full text of the press release of FUEN:

<https://www.fuen.org/news/single/article/condemnation/>

Masjid belonging to Western Thrace Turks in Didymoticho also closed!

Halit Habip Ođlu: “Closing of the masjid in Aleksandria and now the masjid in Didymoticho are the latest examples for restriction of freedom of religion and worship of the Western Thrace Turks with systematic interventions by the Greek authorities.”

The masjid belonging to the association established by the Western Thrace Turks in Didymoticho affiliated to the province of Evros in Greece closed by the order of the police. Following closing of the masjid recently located within the association of the Western Thrace Turks living in Aleksandria district on the grounds that the masjid lacks operating permit, now the masjid within Didymoticho Muslims Education and Culture Association has been red tagged.

Süleyman Macur, Chairman of the Didymoticho Muslims Education and Culture Association, who made a statement about the closure decision, expressed the closure decision is unacceptable regarding the masjid which was put into operation in 2016 belonging to the Western Thrace Turks in the region. He indicated the decision



was communicated to them by the Didymoticho Chief Constable, and they were informed the necessary permission for the masjid to continue its activities should be obtained from the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. He also stated closing of the masjid highly distressed them, adding Koran was taught to children and Friday and Tarawih prayers were performed there. Macur implied if they are designated a place even if that place is a church they would like to worship there and as the community in line with the developments experienced, they have started the necessary legal struggle through the advocate, and he indicated: “This is a policy of intimidation. Look, see, we may close the masjid whenever we like. However, we are highly distressed because of all these experienced. This is a strike blow against freedom of belief and worship of our people. We go to mosques and are not welcomed. We establish our own masjid and are not accepted. Then we



shall go to church and let them give us a place in the church. We shall worship at the church, perform our prayer, this is not a problem for us”.

“Closing of the masjid established by the Western Thrace Turks living in Didymoticho that has been functioning since 2016 is a direct interference into freedom of religion and worship of the Turkish community in Western Thrace. With increasing systematic interferences, recently, Greek authorities restrict the Western Thrace Turks to perform freely their religious prayer. We condemn closing of the masjid in Didymoticho and urge the authorities of our country Greece to respect and not to interfere with the freedom of religion and worship of the Turkish community of Western Thrace”, said Halit Habip Ođlu, President of Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF).

The masjid belonging to an association of Western Thrace Turks in Imathia-Veria was closed

Halit Habip Ođlu: “Although it is clearly written in the statute, the requirement for a separate work permit for the masjid is typical of Greece in the sense that it put obstacles in order to intervene in the freedom of religion and belief.” the freedom of religion and belief.”



The masjid inside Imathia (Veria) Muslims Education, Culture and Sports Association, an association belonging to the Western Thrace Turks, who immigrated to Alexandria (Gida), a district in Veria-Imathia (Karafere) province of Greece, was closed on grounds that that it had no work permit for the masjid.

According to the minority newspaper Gündem, the President of the association Hüseyin Hüseyinoğlu explained that although the association operated in accordance with its statute in which it is clearly noted that the association could conduct Quran religious courses and perform religious activities, the police ordered them to close down the masjid inside the association until it gets a separate work permit for the masjid from the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. Following the amendment in the statute of Imathia (Veria) Muslims Education,

Culture and Sports Association which was which was established in Gide, a district of Imathia-Vera where approximately one thousand Western Thrace Turks live, the masjid inside the association is used for religious prayers and Quran religious courses since 2015.

The closure of the masjid, where approximately 30 students were having Quran courses, had gained a strong reaction from Western Thrace Turks living in the district. The president of the association, Hüseyin Hüseyinoğlu noted that would meet with the deputies and local authorities in the following days and would try to find a solution to the problem.

The President of the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF), Halit Habip Oğlu made the following explanation on the issue: "Despite a clear reference in the statute of the association which is operating

legally, the ban of Quran courses and religious prayers in the masjid of the association is a clear intervention in the freedom of religion and belief of those persons living in the district. There are thousands of mosques which enjoy the status as non-governmental organizations and operate legally in many countries of Europe. Thus, religious prayers and practices are freely done in these mosques. On the other hand, the requirement for a separate work permit for a masjid in typical in the sense that Greece puts various obstacles and restrictions in order to intervene in the freedom of religion and belief in the country. While condemning this intervention in freedom of religion and belief, we want from the Greek authorities to allow them to re-open the masjid within the association and not to intervene in the religious prayers and activities here".

* Photo: www.gundemgazetesi.com

Weapon found in the minaret of Iliopetra (Göynüklü) mosque in Western Thrace

Halit Habip Oğlu: "As ABTTF while we wish good recovery to imam Sabri Emin Kahya, we would like to emphasize that as Western Thrace Turks we are always against violence and terrorism."

At the mosque in Iliopetra (Göynüklü) village in the province of Xanthi in Greece, the public prosecutor and police made a search upon a denouncement. At the search conducted on 28 March 2017, in a backpack two unlicensed guns, one muffler and bullets belonging to these guns were found in the minaret. According to the news of Gündem newspaper, while Sabri Emin Kahya, imam of the mosque was detained, his hunting rifle namely "flobber" confiscated at the search made by the police in his



home. The Imam Sabri Emin Kahya taken to Xanthi Police Department and questioned stood trial on 29 March 2017 and released due to failure of evidence. And the prosecution started by the Xanthi Public Prosecutor's Office related to the weapons found at the mosque continues.

Related to the subject matter, Halit Habip Oğlu, President of Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF), stated: "First we wish good recovery to imam Sabri Emin Kahya. If the recent increase in political oppression and intimidation against Western Thrace Turks is taken into consideration, leaving weapons at a



visible point in the minaret where tens of people visit for worshipping every day, brings along many questions as well. This incident, that took place in the village of Iliopetra (Göynüklü) in Xanthi, is the last scene of the play targeting to embranch the Turkish community of Western Thrace and it is fully a product of a conspiracy. We would like to emphasize that Western Thrace Turks have never been involved in acts of violence in history and have always and absolutely been against violence and terrorism and we expect this incidence to be enlightened at the soonest".

*Image: www.gundemgazetesi.com



Historical mosque in Didymoticho damaged severely by fire

Halit Habip Oğlu: “We expect that Greek authorities detect immediately the reason for the fire outbreak at Çelebi Sultan Mehmet (Beyazıt) Mosque which is under protection of the Greek Ministry of Culture as a cultural artifact and the offenders account before justice.”

A fire started at historical Mosque Çelebi Sultan Mehmet (Beyazıt) in Didymoticho affiliated to the province of Evros in Greece on 22 March 2017 towards morning. During the fire which is yet not known how it started, the roof, purely wooden, and many of internal parts of the mosque, closed for prayer for two years with ongoing restoration works, were completely destroyed.

According to the news in Gündem newspaper, the fire started on the roof where welding works were carried out and spread on all of the roof. As firefighters from Didymoticho and surrounding provinces had difficulty in responding the fire due to severity of the flames, firefighting efforts lasted for hours.



600 years old Mosque Çelebi Sultan Mehmet (Beyazıt) located in city center of Didymoticho is one of the most significant Turkish-Islamic artifacts in Balkans and Europe and it is also specific for being the first mosque constructed by the Ottoman Empire on the European Continent.

“The historical Çelebi Sultan Mehmet (Beyazıt) Mosque in Didymoticho, one of the most important artifacts of the Ottoman Empire in Europe, being damaged severely by fire made us very sad. This six centenary old mosque is one of the most beautiful examples of joint

cultural heritage of our country Greece and motherland Turkey. We expect that the Greek authorities detect immediately the reason for the fire outbreak at Çelebi Sultan Mehmet (Beyazıt) Mosque which is under protection of the Greek Ministry of Culture as a cultural artifact and the offenders account before justice”, stated Halit Habip Oğlu, President of Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF).

*Image: www.gundemgazetesi.com

ABTTF Newsletter

The ABTTF Newsletter in four languages, namely in Turkish, English, Greek and German, is celebrating its twelfth year.

The ABTTF Newsletter, in which the matters of grave concern to the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace, recent developments and current events in Western Thrace and Greece, in particular pertaining to the minority issues and policies, international activities and lobbying of ABTTF aimed at obtaining solutions for the for the problems of the Turkish minority through democracy and peace and information on the activities of the associations of the Turkish minority throughout Europe and the world are dealt with, is being followed with great interest not only by Western Thrace Turks, but also by large parts of the public.

To have more information on subscription to the ABTTF Newsletter, please do not hesitate to contact us.

ABTTF

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