

## **Hellenic Electronic Center (HEC)**

### **A Non-Profit Organization Registered in the US**

**with 38,000 Hellenes as members and 36 Hellenic**

### **associations in the US and abroad**

May 29, 2009

The following letter is in response to the May 27 article on Turkey and the status of the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate. The article inaccurately asserts that there are 60,000 Greek Orthodox Christians left in Turkey. The documentary evidence indicates that in all likelihood there are less than 2,000 faithful who make up the Ecumenical Patriarchate's flock within the borders of Turkey. In 1992, Helsinki Watch published a report on the Greek minority of Turkey and stated there were 2,000 Greeks within the City of Constantinople, and 500 Greeks (mostly elderly) on the islands of Imbros and Tenedos. Considering the discriminatory policies directed against this ancient Christian community and the continued persecution against all Christian communities inside Turkey, it is safe to conclude that the number of Greeks living in Turkey are lower than they were in 1992. In addition, the inaccurate figure of 60,000 that was cited may give readers a false impression of both the present day political climate in Turkey, and the historical acts of terror that led to the destruction of the Greek community. The closure of the Halki Seminary is the last stage in a long and brutal campaign waged by the Turkish authorities against the Greek Orthodox minority. During the Second World War, thousands of Greeks, Armenians, and Jews were deported to "concentration camps" (a term used by the American Jewish Committee in a letter to the State Department in 1947) in Anatolia. In 1955, the Turkish government ordered thugs to orchestrate a pogrom against the defenseless Greek minority, and in 1964 over ten thousand Greeks were deported from Turkey against their wishes.

The Voice of America is to be commended for helping to publicize the difficulties faced by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and for bringing attention to the issue of the Halki Seminary. As for the assertion that Turkey is facing pressure to permit the Patriarchal School of theology to function, this is a debatable point. It is true that international diplomats (American, European, and others) have to their credit called on Turkey to lift its restrictions on the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the actions of the international community which continue to treat Turkey as a respected nation rather than as a pariah deserving the imposition of sanctions and stiff penalties owing to its discriminatory policies, the continuing occupation of Cyprus, and its bullying of foreign governments that seek to recognize the Armenian Genocide through Resolutions, and continuing human rights violations lead only to the appeasement of Turkey.

The tolerance of Turkey through appeasement over the past century by Western governments is precisely why the existence of all the Christian communities in Turkey (Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Assyrian, Catholic) is threatened. The Obama administrations embrace of Turkey has sent a clear message to Ankara that abuses will continue to be tolerated.

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HEC Executive Committee

By Dorian Jones  
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When U.S. President Barack Obama visited Turkey last month, he raised the plight of a small religious school of the Greek Orthodox Church. The Halki seminary was closed by the government in 1971, and despite intense pressure by the church and diplomats the school has remained shut. But pressure is growing on Ankara to reopen the school.

Deacon Doratheos looks after the 165-year old Halki theological school, for the long-awaited time when it reopens its doors. "Here is one of the classes, when the school was at its height there were never more than 120 students. Very few students, good professors so they can have an excellent education. ...We try to keep it clean and well for re-opening," he said.

The school was closed in 1971, as part of legislation to close independent university institutions. But observers say the closure was as much to do with the then high tensions between Turkey and Greece over the island of Cyprus.

Doratheos says the school is crucial to the 60,000-member Greek Orthodox community. The school is the only institution in Turkey that can train priests, and Doratheos says without the school it is becoming increasingly difficult for the church to replace aging priests.

"Each church, each chapel must have its own priest. We cannot imagine a baby unbaptized or one who is dead not to have a priest to conduct the last prayers for him. All those graduates before hand from this school, they were very successful as priests as bishops and as patriarchs," he said.

Supporters of the school's re-opening recently got a boost when President Obama spoke in Turkey's parliament. "For democracies cannot be static, they must move forward, freedom of religion and expression lead to a strong and vibrant civil society that only strengthens the state. Which is why steps like opening Halki Seminary will send such a an important signal inside Turkey and beyond," he said.

The president's call is echoed by the European Union, which Turkey is seeking to join. Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee Spokesman Suat Kiniklioglu says the Turkish government does not oppose reopening the school, but only under certain conditions.

"I do not think it can be solved in the short term. In essence our government has no objection for the school to be reopened and for it to train ... priests for the Greek Orthodox Church. But if the school was to function outside the national education umbrella there could be a multitude of other schools being set up that would seek similar exemption from the national education system. That is something we are not ready to do. But if the Greek Orthodox Church agrees to have the school part of the Turkish educational system there is no problem," he said.

But the offer has been dismissed by the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, Bishop Gennadios, says the school's specialized role of training priests does not fit the country's university structure.

"We would like have our school as it was before. It is not a medical school or school for engineers. It is school which is not just to train priests for our community here in Istanbul, but also other Orthodox churches around the world. And I think this is our right, to have our schools like our churches. And everything that is related to this community, which did not came from outside but is part of this land. They were born here. They are Turkish citizens. They serve in the army. They are loyal to society and as a Turkish citizens they have also their own rights," he said.

At a local church a small service is being held by an aging priest. With no new priests there is growing concern about for the future of the Greek Orthodox Church in Istanbul.

Speaking to worshippers, there is concern for the future and feelings of discrimination. This man's view is typical.

As a citizen of Turkey of Greek decent it is necessary to practice my religion. There are priests who do not deserve this status, but are there just to fill the void. He says military schools are exempt from the ministry education and the church school has to be independent as well.

Ankara is under mounting diplomatic pressure from the United States and the European Union to reopen the school, and that pressure is set to increase with the church considering taking the matter to the European Court of Human Rights.