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Greece prayer case goes to court

By Mitch Pritchard

Democrat and Chronicle (14.08.2009) / HRWF Int. (15.08.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net
– Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The fight against sectarian prayer before town of Greece board meetings got its day in federal court Thursday.

U.S. District Judge Charles Siragusa said he will render a written decision within six weeks.

In a case filed last year, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, on behalf of Greece residents Susan Galloway and Linda Stephens, sued the town of Greece and Supervisor John Auberger over its long-standing policy of opening Town Board meetings with a prayer.

In the hour-long hearing, Richard R. Katskee, assistant legal director for Americans United, argued that the plaintiff is concerned not with prayer before the meetings but with sectarian prayers that have dominated the practice since Auberger started it in 1999.

According to court papers, of 104 prayers from 1999 through 2007, none were non-Christian. Since the lawsuit was filed, the majority of the prayers have been Christian, with one being delivered by a Wiccan priestess and two others by non-clergy.

Katskee stressed that the plaintiff is not against Christian prayer, but that the prayers have been aimed at one sect.

Katskee said the plaintiff just wants the town to ask clergymen who give a sectarian prayer to be non-sectarian in future prayers.

"One prayer that strays would not be basis for a violation," Katskee said.

Joel Oster, a senior litigation counsel for Colorado-based Alliance Defense Fund that is representing Greece, said that it is not right to ask the town to police the clergy.

"It is not the town's place to tell the clergy what to say," Oster said. "It would cause a nightmare for the town."

Auberger has said that the town's practice is to have an open invitation to any Greece resident to contact the town about giving the prayer.

Town officials, however, do invite local clergy to offer prayers on a rotating business.

The rotation is off a published list of religious organizations, all of which are Christian.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1983 that non-sectarian prayers that do not reference a specific deity are permitted at public meetings.

Muslim migrants riot in Greece over defacement of Koran

AP (25.05.2009) / HRWF Int. (26.05.2009) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Dozens of cars were smashed and 14 people were hospitalized with injuries after protests by Muslim immigrants angered at the alleged defacement of a Quran by a Greek policeman ended in a riot.

Police fired tear gas and stun grenades at hundreds of protesters outside parliament and elsewhere in the Athens city center. The government said 46 protesters were arrested and 75 cars were damaged.

Chanting "God is great!" and waving leather-bound copies of Islam's holy book, about 1,500 Muslim immigrants - mostly young men - marched to Parliament in the center of Athens to express their anger. The clashes occurred after the protest had dwindled to about 300.

Rioters hurled rocks at police and attacked police cordons with sticks and their belts, ignoring pleas for calm in Arabic and Greek from protest organizers. The violence spread as young men overturned cars, set fire to trash bins and attacked several banks.

Seven policemen and seven immigrants were being treated in hospital for injuries, police said.

Onlookers, including tourists in Athens' central square, watched, with some holding up their cell phones to photograph the protesters.

Police said they will investigate the allegation that a police officer tore up the Iraqi immigrant's copy of the Quran while checking his identity papers in Athens on Wednesday.

"Anyone found responsible will be strictly held to account. But this isolated incident cannot justify these acts of violence," said Christos Markoyiannakis, a minister in charge of police.

Police released photographs of the torn Quran but gave no further details.

"We want the officer or officers involved to be prosecuted, and the government to issue an apology," protester Manala Mohammed, a Syrian national who helped organize the rally, told The Associated Press. "We want people to show us respect."

Most Greece's native born population of 10.7 million are baptized into the Christian Orthodox Church.

Waves of illegal immigration over the past few years have led to an influx of Muslims, mostly from Pakistan and Afghanistan. Many live in squalid, overcrowded apartments in run-down parts of central Athens.

In 2008, Greek authorities arrested more than 145,000 migrants entering the country illegally, a 30 percent increase from the previous year and a 54 percent jump from 2006, according to figures from the Interior Ministry.

Greek rights activist Thanassis Kourkoulas, one of the protest organizers, said the marches were intended to show that immigrants have a voice.

"What happened is a great insult to every Muslim, every immigrant and every Greek who respects democracy," he said

European court fines Turkey in Greek Orthodox case

Ayla Jean Yackley

Reuters (04.03.2009) / HRWF Int. (05.03.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The European Court of Human Rights Tuesday ruled Turkey had violated the property rights of a Greek Orthodox foundation by seizing its land and ordered the government to pay damages.

Judges said Turkey had breached the European Convention on Human Rights by barring the foundation from registering its title to a church and surrounding lands on the Aegean island of Bozcaada, a statement from the court said.

It is the latest ruling by the Strasbourg-based court against Turkey for violating the property rights of its ethnic Greek minority. The European Union, which Turkey seeks to join, has called on the government to return seized properties to minorities and expand their religious and cultural freedoms.

The European Court of Human Rights fined Turkey 105,000 euros (\$131,880) for damages and expenses after it ruled authorities had illegally prevented the rightful owner of the Kimisis Teodoku Greek Orthodox Church from registering its property, the statement said.

The foundation was denied the right to register its title to three pieces of land and a building on the island after the state land registry was reorganized in 1991, the statement said.

Turkish courts had ruled against the foundation because it had missed an initial deadline to re-register its deed and had ordered the property be turned over to the state Treasury.

The Istanbul-based Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, spiritual leader of 250 million faithful worldwide, has filed more than two dozen cases with the European Court of Human Rights to recover some of the thousands of properties it says it has lost.

In September, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in a separate case that Turkey had violated the property rights of the patriarchate by seizing a 100-year-old orphanage on an island off of Istanbul and ordered its return.

It has also ruled that Turkey illegally took control of other properties in Istanbul owned by Greek foundations.

About 25 mostly elderly ethnic Greeks live on Bozcaada, part of a community of 2,500 Greeks in Turkey, which is 99 percent Muslim. Istanbul, Turkey's largest city, is also home to about 15,000 Jews and 60,000 Armenians.

"More and strenuous efforts are needed to protect minority rights" says Commissioner Hammarberg

CoE (19.02.2009) / HRWF Int. (05.03.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - "Effective protection of minority rights is a fundamental pillar of pluralist societies. Greece still needs to make more and strenuous efforts to ensure that these rights are fully respected and protected". With these words Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, published today [a report on human rights of minorities in Greece](#), focusing on issues relating to the right to freedom of association, statelessness and application of the Sharia Law.

While commending certain efforts made by the authorities in particular in the field of minority education in Thrace, the Commissioner remains deeply worried about the persistent denial of recognition of minorities other than the tripartite 'Muslim' one in western Thrace. The Commissioner also expresses his serious concerns by the over-restrictive practice of Greek courts that has led to non-registration of certain minority associations. "The authorities should urgently make possible the effective enjoyment by minority members of their right to freedom of association" said Thomas Hammarberg. "A consultative mechanism should also be created to ensure a continuous dialogue at all levels with minority groups, in accordance with the Council of Europe standards."

The Commissioner also urges the authorities to complete promptly their efforts aimed at restoring the Greek nationality of those minority members who were deprived of it unlawfully by virtue of the former nationality code. "Particular care should be provided to those remained in Greece and who have limited financial resources to cover welfare and medical services" said the Commissioner. "As for the denationalised persons who are abroad, the authorities should consider the possibility of providing them, or their descendants, with satisfaction."

Furthermore, Commissioner Hammarberg expresses serious concerns about the application of the Sharia Law concerning family and inheritance matters to Muslim Greek citizens in Thrace, by Muftis appointed by the Greek state. "Given the issues of incompatibility of this practice with European and international human rights standards, it is necessary to overhaul this practice and strengthen the substantive review and control by domestic courts of the Muftis' judicial decisions."

Finally, the Commissioner calls upon the Greek authorities to proceed promptly to the ratification of or accession to certain major Council of Europe treaties, such as the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the European Convention on Nationality and the Fourth Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights.

The report is based on the Commissioner's visit to Greece on 8-10 December 2008. It is available, together with the Greek authorities' comments, on the Commissioner's website:

<https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1409353&Site=CommDH&BackColorInternet=FEC65B&BackColorIntranet=FEC65B&BackColorLogged=FFC679>

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