



TURKISH REPUBLIC OF NORTHERN CYPRUS
MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
(Lefkoşa, via Mersin-10 Turkey)
OHCHR REGISTRY

14 MAY 2011

Recipients: SPD

3 May 2011

Dear Mr. Bielefeldt,

I wish to refer to your letters dated 17 February and 21 April 2011 regarding the allegations communicated to you about the Greek Orthodox Christian community residing in the Karpaz area of Northern Cyprus and to bring the following to your kind attention.

First of all, I wish to express our appreciation for this opportunity to shed light on the realities about the alleged incident in particular, and the rights and freedoms enjoyed by the Greek Cypriot community living in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in general.

Before I make certain clarifications as regards the realities surrounding the alleged incident, I wish to stress the strong commitment of the Turkish Cypriot side to the ongoing negotiating process on the Island which is conducted under the good offices mission of the United Nations Secretary-General and aimed at finding a comprehensive settlement to the Cyprus problem. We believe that it is the prime responsibility of the both sides to refrain from any action which might jeopardize the negotiating process. On our part, we are showing the necessary sensitivity and goodwill towards this end. However, we are witnessing with disappointment that, as in the case of "25 December incident", the Greek Cypriot side continues to exploit every opportunity to promote enmity and further its systematic defamation campaign against Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot side at the expense of the negotiating process.

Mr. Heiner Bielefeldt
Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
Geneva

As a matter of fact, the allegations brought to your attention reflect neither the realities of the case in point nor the general facts regarding the exercise of freedom of religion in Northern Cyprus. Every individual living within the territory of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) enjoys freedom of religion, thought and conscience. Members of the faiths of Islam, Christianity and Judaism as well as followers of other beliefs can individually or collectively practice their religions freely. These principles are enshrined in the Constitution of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, particularly in Article 23. TRNC is a democratic and secular state where the rule of law prevails. The Constitution safeguards the rights and freedoms of all people, regardless of their citizenship, religious affiliation or ethnic origin, in line with international instruments for the protection of civil and political rights.

As regards the allegations communicated to you, it is highly disturbing to observe that even the information provided about the population of the Greek Cypriots living in the Karpaz area is distorted. Contrary to the "information" provided, the so called "decline" in the number of Greek Cypriots living in the Karpaz area, compared to the figures in 1960, is the end-result of the 1975 Voluntary Population Exchange Agreement through which Greek Cypriots chose to reorganize themselves in the South while the Turkish Cypriots moved to the North. Only a small Greek Cypriot population, composed mainly of elderly people, had chosen to stay in North Cyprus and in time their population has declined as some of the members of the community passed away through natural causes. As a matter of fact, the Greek Cypriot community of Northern Cyprus, who live mainly in the Karpaz area, enjoy all human rights and freedoms without any discrimination or limitation. Their living conditions are on a par with the Turkish Cypriots living in the same area.

It is a regularly reported fact by the relevant international bodies that Greek Cypriots as well as other religious groups living in North Cyprus can freely exercise their religious duties and conduct religious services freely on their holy days. Furthermore, the Turkish Cypriot authorities also made it possible for two Greek Cypriot priests, designated by the Greek Cypriot administration, to serve in the area populated by Greek Cypriots. According to the current regulations, the Greek Cypriots can conduct religious service in churches located in their area of residence at any day of the week and any time of the year without any limitation or requirement for prior permission.

After giving you a broader picture concerning religious and human rights standards in Northern Cyprus, let me first provide you with certain facts concerning the allegations contained in your letter dated 17 February 2011. As regards the

Christmas mass that was brought to your attention, it should be underlined that according to the regulations in place at the time of the mass in question, notification in the form of a written application was required in advance for services to be held at any day of the week other than Sundays. This was aimed at enabling the local authorities to take the necessary measures for the safe conduct of the mass. The Greek Cypriot administration as well as the Greek Cypriots living in the TRNC were well aware of this procedure and, as a matter of fact, there has not been any problem until the last incident since the necessary applications had always been made in a timely fashion. However, this year, Greek Cypriots did not make an application for Christmas services within the expected time frame despite the fact that our authorities had reminded the Greek Cypriots living in the area that they should make the necessary application in time if they planned to conduct a Christmas Mass on 25 December 2010. The Greek Cypriots, however, refrained from making an application and preferred to make a last minute telephone call in late afternoon of Friday, 24 December 2010, to our Ministry to request the facilitation of a Christmas Service for the following day. However, as all the relevant government offices were closed by then, it was not possible to make the necessary arrangements despite our best efforts and the Greek Cypriot representative in the Kapraz area was informed accordingly.

The allegations regarding the course of events on 25 December 2010 are also completely distorted. Neither the priest nor the community was forced out of the church and the church was not sealed. On the contrary, all present individuals freely exercised their religious duties at the Ayios Sinesios Church and our authorities did not enter the premises. The Greek Cypriot representative also fails to mention the fact that on 25 December 2010, a new request was made for four services to be held on 31 December, 1 January, 5 and 6 January 2011 at the same church. This application was considered favorably despite the short notice and services were conducted by the resident priest, Papazacharias Georgiou, clearly demonstrating goodwill on our part.

Moreover, contrary to the Greek Cypriot allegations, no request was made to conduct a Christmas service at the nearby village of Sipahi (Ayla Triada). The only application in this regard was for a service to be conducted on 6 January 2011 and the request was duly approved. It should also be noted that, to date, almost all applications for religious services have been facilitated except for a few extraordinary cases. It is most important, in this respect, that none of the Christmas service requests have ever been denied.

Regarding the alleged ban mentioned in your letter to holding an evening mass by Greek Orthodox worshippers in the Karpaz area on 4 February 2011, I would like

to clarify that these allegations are also unfounded. There has been no application or notification made to our authorities regarding such a mass. Therefore, there can be no question of a ban on the intended service.

Now allow me to make some clarifications as regards the allegations contained in your second letter, dated 21 April 2011. In relation to the application to celebrate a religious service at the Saint Gergios Church in the Vadili (Vatyli) village, let me first underline that for the total population of around 500 Greek Cypriots and Maronites residing in the North, currently there are 19 churches in use for religious ceremony and the one in Vadili is not amongst them. As a matter of fact, a religious service has never been conducted in this church in the past as there is no Greek Cypriot community in the area. Thus, the Greek Cypriot application to hold a religious ceremony in this church, despite being fully aware of this fact, can only be explained as another attempt to exploit the issue of religious freedom for political propaganda purposes.

As regards the allegations concerning the so-called "Bishop of Karpasia" and his attempt to hold a mass in the village of Dipkarpaz (Rizokarpaso), it should be noted that the person in question is well-known for his past statements aimed at stirring enmity and hatred among our Greek Cypriot community against the Turkish Cypriot people. Furthermore, the title he claims to bear as the "Bishop of Karpasia" is not recognized by our relevant authorities.

In relation to the allegation that since 17 March 2001 pilgrims to the Monastery of Apostolos Andreas are required to pay an entrance fee, let me clarify that the entrance fee in questions (which is less than half a Euro) is for entrance to the Karpaz Peninsula National Park and not for the Monastery of Apostolos Andreas. The purpose of collecting this fee is to raise funds for the protection and the maintenance of the National Park as is the case for many other national parks worldwide. This issue has arisen due to the fact that the Monastery is located within the area designated as a national park. Following the misunderstanding that the fee was collected as an entrance fee to the Monastery, our relevant authorities have recently made a statement underlining that during the holy days of Christianity, when more Greek Cypriots are expected to visit the Monastery, no fee will be collected for entrance to the National Park.

Finally, for the allegation that on 17 March 2011, copies of the New Testament and prayer books destined for the Greek Cypriot school children in the North were confiscated, I need to stress that it is yet another attempt of the Greek Cypriot side to create "artificial crisis" which shall subsequently be exploited for political propaganda purposes. As a matter of fact, there is a well-established procedure in place for the

books to be delivered from South Cyprus to the Greek Cypriot schools in the North. Accordingly, the books to be used in the Greek Cypriot primary and secondary schools in the North are conveyed to our Ministry by the United Nations Peace Keeping Forces in Cyprus (UNFICYP) and following the completion of the relevant procedure, the books are delivered to the Greek Cypriot schools through UNFICYP. Despite being well-aware of this procedure, the Greek Cypriot attempt to bring certain books to the North without the prior knowledge of our authorities and without following the established procedure can only be treated as a failed attempt to smuggle items into the country. Furthermore, it is ill-intentioned initiative aimed at creating further incidents for propaganda purposes.

In view of the foregoing, it is our considered opinion that the allegations brought to your attention are being fabricated by the Greek Cypriot administration as part of its defamation campaign against the Turkish Cypriot side and Turkey. The Greek Cypriot administration has recently been escalating its policy of provocation and creating artificial crisis with a view to diverting the agenda of the international community away from the settlement negotiations which are being marred by the intransigence and maximalist positions of the Greek Cypriot side.

In the face of the Greek Cypriot policy of exploiting the religious and human rights of the Greek Cypriot residents of Northern Cyprus for political propaganda purposes, our Government has recently revised the procedure on the matter. According to the revised procedure currently in effect, Greek Cypriots living in the TRNC can hold religious services on any day of the week at the churches situated in their areas of residence without any need for prior application, and the minimum number of days required to make an application for services which require prior notification has been reduced to ten working days.

As for the questions you raised in your both letters, I would like to provide specific answers in view of the aforementioned.

1. The alleged incidents by no way reflect the truth.
2. No complaint has been lodged with regards to these incidents.
3. (a) Greek Cypriots living in the TRNC can hold religious services conducted by the two designated Greek Cypriot priests (Priests Zaharias Georgiou and Konstantinos Panteli) on any day of the week without any permission at the churches (Ayia Trias and Ayios Sinesios Churches in Dipkarpaz village and Ayias Trias Church in Sipahi village) that are located near the areas they reside.

(b) Greek Cypriots living in the TRNC are required to apply for permission for religious services which are:

- i. to be held in churches or monasteries in the TRNC other than the above-mentioned three churches,
- ii. to be conducted by any priest other than the above-mentioned two designated priests, and
- iii. to be held with the collective participation of Greek Cypriots residing in South Cyprus.

(c) The minimum number of days required to make an application for such services has been reduced to ten working days. Hence, the application form should be submitted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at least ten working days before the date of the planned event.

(d) All requests from South Cyprus to conduct religious services at the churches or monasteries in the TRNC are subject to prior notification and permission. However, the minimum number of days required to make an application has been reduced to ten working days. The applications should be submitted through UNFICYP to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at least ten working days before the date of the planned event.

It should also be stressed at this point that some of the churches that are being used for special masses, such as St. Barnabas and St. Mamas, also serve as icon museums. Therefore, advanced notification is required to enable the Department of Antiquities and Museums to ensure the safety of the valuable items on display.

Before I conclude, I wish to draw your attention to a few examples demonstrating the total disregard of the Greek Cypriot authorities to the religious rights and freedoms of the Turkish Cypriot people. The Turkish Cypriots living in South Cyprus, who are estimated to be over 1,000 are allowed access to worship at only two mosques in South Cyprus, namely Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque in Larnaca and Koprulu Mosque in Limassol. Moreover, the Greek Cypriot administration does not allow the designation of Turkish Cypriot Imams by our religious authorities to the mosques situated in South Cyprus, despite the fact that two Greek Cypriot priests serving in North Cyprus have been designated by the Greek Cypriot authorities with our agreement. Our citizens are allowed only limited access to Hala Sultan Mosque in South Cyprus and are being restricted on the basis of their origin. According to the

Greek Cypriot administration, TRNC citizens who are born in Turkey and their descendants do not have the right to visit the Hala Sultan Mosque which is one of the most important religious sites of the Islamic faith. This amounts to nothing but a gross violation of human rights as well as racial discrimination and is clearly in breach of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

We hope and trust that the foregoing will duly be taken into account by the Human Rights Council in the interest of reflecting the realities on the island and preventing the exploitation of these high values for political purposes by the Greek Cypriot administration.

I wish to seize this opportunity to thank you once again for your interest and wish you the best in your current and future endeavors.

Yours Sincerely,



Hüseyin Özgürgün
Minister of Foreign Affairs

