

ESU External Activities

During last months, the European Syriac Union undertook several external missions regarding the recent problems that the Syrians are facing in Turkey. Currently, Syrians in Turkey confront many difficulties and are threatened in their homeland.

For this reason, ESU sent a letter to Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu concerning these incidents and making attention about events. The letter was sent in order to inform the Turkish officials about the harsh conditions and problems of the Syrians in Turkey. In this letter it was stated that, 'the Syrians are one of the oldest pieces of the country's mosaic. They were always loyal and peaceful to their country and rulers. Unfortunately, they never had the much needed protection of the state in exchange for this loyalty.'



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The letter continues to mention other current problems that the Syriac face in Turkey and especially in their historical region of Turabdin. It is highlighted that, "...to accelerate Syriac migration intimidation aggressions and finally murders took place. Consequently in the beginning of the 1980's tens of thousands Syrians fled to the Western countries. The rest continued to be victims of the systematic campaigns of intimidation and "unsolved murders". Further, as the accession process of Turkey to the European Union started to deteriorate' parallel to that, from last year onwards there has been a significant acceleration in the systematic oppression campaigns against the Syrians.

On 22 October 2009 officials from the Culture and Tourism Ministry issued a decree to demolish some renovation works and new constructed water reservoir of Mor Yakup Monastery in Saleh (Baristepe), a village which belongs to Midyat district of Mardin province. Mor Yakup Monastery is one of the oldest religious centers in the region. During the last few years, Syrians by using their own means are trying to renovate some of their historic places of worship which were ruined and uncare for. On the other hand, the pasturelands of the Syriac village of Bnebil (Bülbül) which is situated in the vicinity of Mardin province have been given to an industrial firm by the Mardin Governorate; thus the historical fields of the village ruined by the industrial work taking place in this historical Syriac village.

Moreover, the head of the Syriac Mesopotamia Cultural association (MEZO-Der) Mr. Tuma Özdemir was arrested and imprisoned as a result of a business scam set up against him. Further, during the last few months the attacks against the Syrians in Turkey have been accelerating constantly. Last month (in November 2009) Mr. Anto Nuay who is the chairman of the Syriac Churches Foundation Trust in Midyat was attacked and battered in the middle of the street.

In an interview made by SuroyoTV with the Turkish Parliament Speaker Mr. Mehmet Ali Sahin, he stated "Syriacs can come to their homeland to live in peace and friendship, the Parliament which I chair is their Parliament, the country is their country".

However, as it has been indicated in the European Commission annual progress report on Turkey, the Syrians are continuing to suffer and face problems in the country. Thus, it is clearly mentioned that "The Syrians can provide only informal training, outside any officially established schools. Despite the progress made on obtaining work permits for foreign clergy who wish to work in Turkey, overall procedures remain cumbersome."

Also, attention is drawn to the continuing legal cases against the Mor Gabriel Monastery. Accordingly, it is stated that "Syriacs continue to face difficulties in relation to property. A number of court cases are in progress concerning both private individuals and religious institutions. In particular, the Mor Gabriel Syriac Orthodox monastery has faced problems regarding the ownership of its historical lands. A number of court cases continued throughout the reporting period related to: new administrative borders between the monastery and the neighboring villages following cadastral land registry work; Treasury claims that land used by the monastery belongs to the State; and claims by the Ministry of Forests that public forest areas are enclosed within the monastery's external walls. The local judicial authorities brought criminal cases against the monastery for "occupying" this forest area. The monastery maintains that the land belongs to it and that it has in its possession official administrative and tax documents substantiating its claims. All cases are on-going."

Finally, it's stated that Turkey needs to ensure the full respect of the property rights of all-non Muslim religious communities and full respect for and protection of language, culture and fundamental rights, in accordance with the European standards have yet to be fully achieved. Turkey made limited efforts to enhance tolerance or to promote inclusiveness regarding its minorities."

ESU-Youth visit to the European Parliament

The 22nd of October was an important day in the history of the Syriac youth. That day we visited the European Parliament in Brussels, after a 2 months registration process.

By awakening the interest of the youth we had come up with the idea to visit the European Parliament and at the same time to make this trip as educational as possible. Therefore we set up a small group of activists. The group consisted of 20 members who are settled in various European countries. Most of these members came from The Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Belgium, France and Switzerland.

We had a very rough start that day. We had to organize all the members and organize among us all housekeeping etc. It was not easy to organize this trip to the European Parliament. After all, the day that we had our appointment was on Thursday, and at the same time some of our members had to go to work the next day. So, all members had to arrive on time, sleep on time and depart on time. But all in all we can say that we managed to finish this project successfully and we already have ambitions to achieve a next mission. Who knows, perhaps a trip to the NATO...?

When we arrived at the European Parliament we received a presentation about the structure and the institutional bodies of the European Union. This consisted of the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, and the Court of Justice

of the European Communities. Even though the presentation was very interesting and difficult to follow by some of the members nevertheless the interest was very high. After the presentation we had a chance to ask several questions about the European Union and its strategy. Some of the questions we asked were about the jurisdiction within the EU, others about the foreign policies of the EU and some about the opportunities available for the youth within the EU and its bodies.

After the presentation we also had an opportunity to see the European Parliament meeting chamber. If there was any meeting at that time, we could have participated to the meeting as visitors. But unfortunately there was no meeting when we arrived.

All the members were very satisfied with this trip and are looking forward for the next venture. We as the leading board of the ESU-Youth are therefore very ambitious to continue our work and to keep our members educated with the most actual information and experiences available to us.

prepared by ESU-youth



INTERVIEW

Exclusive interview with the ESU Vice-Chairman Mr. Fikri Ayygur about last developments and difficulties that face Syriacs in Turkey.

Mr. Ayygur, in recent days, the Syriacs in Turkey faced so many problems. How do you explain this situation?

Turkey consists of various ethnic groups. But the Turkish state does not allow any prospect for the flourishing of other cultures. Whenever there is a demand or insistence from the West to improve its human rights, Turkey practices vast pressures on the ethnic groups to stop such demands. In 1999, Turkey became a candidate to join the European Union. Within the framework of the Copenhagen criteria Turkey had to make some improvements, once again the pan-Islamist AKP government came to power and the democratization process has turned into a mockery. In recent days, when talking about "openings" towards the Kurdish, Alevi and Roman ethnic groups, the oppressions against the Christian peoples have increased and such systematic attacks start to take place.

Following the minaret referendum which was held in Switzerland, the priest of the Virgin Mary Church's of Diyarbakir Rev. Father Yusuf Akbulut was victim of a threatening attack. It is also important to remember that Father Yusuf Akbulut was charged and tried before in the state security court. What do you want to say about this incident?

On 2000, Father Yusuf Akbulut following his statement in which he said "also the Syriacs were massacred in 1915" was charged in the state security court. Following the murder of catholic monk Santoro in Trabzon on 2006, three missionaries that were killed in Malatya and after the murder of Hrant Dink, an Armenian journalist, Father Yusuf Akbulut was threatened with death by a group. Once again with Swiss minaret issue the door of Father Yusuf Akbulut was knocked. Father Yusuf Akbulut was again chosen to be a sacrifice of the increase of Islamism in Turkey.

The Christians who live in Turkey always have been victims of the developments that occur in Europe. In 1961 Cyprus events and on 2005 following Mohammed cartoon incident in Denmark, the Syriacs in Turkey came under attacks. The reason was "if Muslims suffer in Christian Europe their vengeance will be taken back on the Christians who live inside (Turkey)."

At the same time within two month there were attacks against the Syriacs in Midyat and in Istanbul an administrator of a Syriac association was arrested. Such attacks take a systematic shape. What should be done to prevent these attacks?

In November 2009, in two separate incidents, the Midyat Church Foundation Chairman Mr. Anto Nuay and a well-known personality Mr. Gevriye Saylik were attacked and assaulted on the street. Shortly after, the Chairman of Mesopotamian Cultural Association Mr. Tuma Ozdemir was jailed as a result of a business scam that was set up against him. Also we, as ESU, will try within our capacities to increase the awareness of the general public opinion in Turkey and the international community in order to make pressure on Turkey to take the necessary measures to prevent these problems that the Syriacs face in Turkey.

During 2009 the trials of Mor Gabriel Monastery were at the top of the agenda. How do you see the future process in these trials?

The Mor Gabriel legal battle has become a political rather than a judicial process. One thousand years before the Turks invaded and arrived in Mesopotamia the Mor Gabriel and hundreds of other churches in the region owned a significant wealth. However, since then many times the rights of monasteries were restricted and their properties were appropriated by force. The other remaining properties were protected by joint

efforts of the community because the cadastral system was still not in place. Following the commencement of the cadastral works last year, two ministries of Turkey (the Forestry and Treasury) sued Mor Gabriel. Actually, the real motive behind this official action is not for a few meters of lands, but it aims to block before other monasteries to get their property rights. Because if Syriacs, Armenians and Greeks begin properly to demand their churches properties, the Turkish authorities fear that they will encounter more difficulties. Thus, with the Mor Gabriel trials they try to block and cut off the demands right the beginning.

Currently there are some difficulties at Mor Yahkup Monastery situated in Saleh (Baristepe) and with the village of Bnebil (Bulbul). What would you like to say about them?

Mor Yahkup Monastery is one of the oldest and still functioning monasteries in the Turabdin. In 2007 the abbot of this monastery Edip Savci was kidnapped by a group of state funded village guards who receive regular salaries from the state. As a result of the pressure from the West the incident was quickly solved. After this the abbot started with restoration works for the monastery. However, in order to stop these renovations the state authorities issued a decree to demolish these new works. And the excuse which they based their allegation upon was that these works damaged the historical aspect of monastery.

However the grasslands of the Syriac village Bnebil which is an archaeological site has been given to an industrial company, by the authorities, which and damaging the nature of village. On the one hand the authorities who claim that they have an intention to protect the Syriac culture are harming the cultural, historical and environmental shape of the Bnebil village.

As a whole how do you explain all these problems that Syriacs face?

Syriacs are a native people of north Mesopotamia. The existence of the Syriacs was always threatened by the Turks. From the era that Turkey dominated this region the Syriac population is dwindling. Once the population of the Syriacs in Turabdin was counted as millions and today reduced to a group of only about three thousand individuals. Even if this small number of people is being victim of harassments that means the main objective of the state is to wipe out the Syriacs from the region and exclude them from the "democratic opening" initiative that the state has announced.

Turkey on one hand is talking about integration to the EU, on the other hand as we observe the attacks against the minorities continue. What would you like to say about this picture of Turkey?

Actually if Turkey wants to join the EU it has to implement more effectively the Copenhagen Criteria. Turkey wants to profit from the EU about every subject but it does not want to change anything. Consequently, when Turkey is criticized about its performance regarding the minority-religious rights, it tries to suppress their voices inside the country. This is not a new method; actually it is a method that Turkey has been utilizing for the last four hundred years. That is to say, Turkey wants to be seen as a democratic and pro western country, but it does not want any minorities left inside.

Which steps Turkey has to take in order to protect the Syriacs in the region?

The dominant mentality in Turkey is "Turk and Sunni Islam". This mentality has to be changed and all other ethnic and religious minorities must be given the means and possibility to cherish in the same way. Thus providing constitutional guarantees for the rights of the Christian folks and Alevi and endow new provisions for recovering the losses of the victims who fled out because of its wrong policies. Turkey will not become a part of the modern world unless it guarantees the rights of its ethnic differences.



The Voice of the Syriacs

IMPRINT

Information bulletin about the social position of the Syriacs in and outside the Middle East. It appears periodically, published by the European Syriac Union (ESU) in Brussels-Belgium.

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Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian folk wants autonomy in Iraq

On 03-04 December 2009, a group of 1300 representatives of the Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian people gathered and held a historic conference in Erbil, Northern Iraq. At the first conference that was held on 2007, the Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian representatives had declared their demand of an autonomous region to be established in the areas densely populated with the Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian people at the North Iraq.

After two years of work the council undertakings improved to a higher phase and the demands to reshape the Peoples Council were increased. On the 04 December 2009, the new elected council was established at the conference with the attendance of the representatives from all regions around the world where Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian people have presence.

The new council consists of 31 representatives. The presidency of the council in this new term will be based on a rotating system between the 3 members of the executive committee of the Council. At the next four years the council will carry out works in order to help with the process of establishing an autonomous region and once autonomy is declared for the Chaldean-Assyrian-Syriac people' then this Council be dissolved and be transformed to a legitimate parliament for the autonomous region.

The area where this autonomous region will be established is thought to begin from the villages around Mosul (the Nineveh Plains) and extends upwards to the north until the border with Turkey. At this region at least about 65 percent of the population is Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian. The first council worked for the development of this autonomous region under the Kurdish federation. However, the

villages which are situated in the south of Nineveh Plains were under the Sunni Arab administration, hence this situation of having an area divided between the administrations of two different federative regions paved the way to new dangers threatening the Chaldean-Assyrian-Syriac people in their historical homeland.

Especially the villages in the Nineveh Plains are located over the rich oil fields, thus they attract the Sunni Arabs who are against the idea of letting them to be left for the Kurdish Regional government in the North. Furthermore also Iraqi government utilizes various tactics to make demographic changes in order to place Arabs in the territories of the Christian Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrians. More recently, the Iraqi government decided to establish mosques at the Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian villages that have no presence of any Muslim living in them. According to the Iraqi laws, the prevention of construction of mosques is considered to be a crime in Iraq. However, if the mosques will be constructed, a significant Muslim population will be settled in the Christian villages and the demographic texture will be changed. Thus the historical weight of the Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrians and their significant cultural existence in this area will start to diminish.

Accordingly, there is a significant amount of work of great importance that is waiting before the newly established Peoples Council. The most important tasks to be undertaken by the Peoples Council in this period will be the declaration of the autonomous region of the Chaldean-Assyrian-Syriac people and the prevention of any demographic changes in this historical region which is still densely inhabited by the Chaldean-Assyrian-Syriac people.

Swedish Social Democratic Party Congress

The Syriac genocide Sayfo is one of the darkest periods that encountered in their history. The Sayfo had great destructive effects on their social and cultural texture and because of the genocide thousands of Syriac had to flee from their country. As a result the Syriacs are living as scattered immigrant communities all around the world.

The resolution of the Social Democratic Party of Sweden is a very important step towards the recognition of Sayfo Genocide. Because it opens the prospect among other political parties for a new discussion and creating public opinion in Sweden and in the rest of the world especially under the umbrella of the European Union. Also according to the Qenneshrin newspaper, soon an official Sayfo monument will be constructed in the Australia on behalf of the victims of this tragedy.

The European Syriac Union welcomes both, this historic resolution of the Social Democratic Party of Sweden and the erection of a monument by the Fairfield Council in Australia and is hopeful that these two historic developments will set an example to other political institutions around the world, so that the tragedies that the Syriacs encountered in their past which effect them until today are not forgotten dealt with in an appropriate way.

The ESU also places a very significant importance on the Sayfo issue and every year undertakes several works and activities in remembrance and as an effort towards the recognition of this issue.



*Dear readers,
As the ESU Administration, we wish you a Merry Christmas and may the year of 2010 bring you all achievements and success.*