

## **WCC welcomes Turkish move to protect religious minorities' rights**

WCC press release: 27 May 2010

**The World Council of Churches (WCC) general secretary Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit has welcomed a recent Turkish government decree allowing for a better protection of the rights of non-Muslim religious minorities in Turkey.**

"It is only fair that this new and positive development is commended by all those concerned about the situation of Christian and other non-Muslim religious minorities in Turkey", said Tveit commenting on the news.

According to a 21 May report by Ecumenical News International, the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan issued a decree in mid-May ordering local officials "to do more to protect the rights of Christian and other non-Muslim religious minorities, such as by returning their confiscated properties and taking action against anti-Christian groups".

"We hope local Turkish officials will expedite the application of this decree and thus bring about an improvement in the situation of communities which, as the Prime Minister has said, are an inseparable part of the Republic of Turkey and must feel fully valued as citizens of the country", Tveit said.

"Of course, more needs to be done, but this is a sign that goes in the right direction", he added.

"We don't feel that we enjoy our full rights as Turkish citizens", the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew said as recently as 17 December 2009, when he was featured by the US TV show 60 Minutes.

During the last week of November 2009 representatives of the WCC and the Conference of European Churches made an official visit to Turkey so as to encourage the authorities to improve the situation of religious minorities.

In Istanbul and Ankara, the delegation met with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Archbishop Aram Atesian from the Armenian Patriarchate, and the Archbishop Mor Timotheos Samuel Aktas of the Syrian Orthodox Mor Gabriel Monastery. It also met representatives of the Jewish community as well as with government officials. The exercise of religious freedom, the legal status of churches, including property issues, and the right to religious education were on the agenda.

Amongst the pending issues for the Ecumenical Patriarchate are the obstacles to the re-opening of the Theological School of Halki, which was the patriarchate's main theological seminary until its closure. Situated on Heybeliada island in the Marmara sea off Istanbul, the school was closed by the Turkish authorities in 1971.

"I visited the Halki school during my visit to the Ecumenical Patriarch last March and was impressed by the fact that it has been maintained in complete repair and ready for the day when it will be allowed to reopen", commented Tveit. "And indeed we pray for this to happen soon."