

Press Release

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Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights concludes his visit to Turkey

Strasbourg, 03.07.2009 - Commissioner Hammarberg concluded today a six-day visit to Turkey during which he held discussions with the President, the Ministers of Justice and EU Affairs and other representatives of national and local authorities, international agencies and non-governmental organisations. The focus was on the human rights of minorities as well as of asylum seekers and refugees.

The Commissioner encouraged the authorities to take further action in order to protect fully minority members' freedom of expression and align legislation and practice with the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. It appears necessary that certain provisions of the criminal code, such as Articles 301 and 220, and their application be revisited.

Commissioner Hammarberg commended reforms that have taken place in recent years in order to enhance freedom of association and the operation of political parties. He invited the authorities to pursue their reflection and reforms, as recommended also by the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly and the Venice Commission.

He appreciated the willingness shown by the Turkish authorities to adopt further measures for the effective protection and respect of minority members' freedom of religion. A new impetus appears evident with regard to the reopening of the Halki (Heybeliada) Seminary. The Commissioner considers necessary the establishment by the authorities of systematic consultations with all minority groups (Muslim and non-Muslim) on all issues that regard their human rights and affect their daily lives. Special attention should also be paid to pending property-related issues which are of particular importance for the survival of certain minorities.

Commissioner Hammarberg was pleased to see the authorities' willingness to resolve the persistent issue of internally displaced persons (IDPs), in full respect of the latter's wishes to return home, resettle or integrate locally. He recommended acceleration of implementation of all relevant action plans already concluded or about to be prepared.

Finally, the Commissioner discussed issues relating to the protection of the human rights of Roma from Sulukule with the Mayor of Fatih municipality in Istanbul and with Roma representatives. Whilst understanding the authorities' concerns and appreciating their efforts to upgrade the living standards in the historic area of Sulukule, the Commissioner remains concerned about the process of dislocation of Roma. A number of them seemed to have remained homeless while certain evictions occurred without making available alternative accommodation for Roma families, contrary to Council of Europe human rights standards.

Commissioner Hammarberg visited « guesthouses » holding foreign nationals subject to removal, and unaccompanied foreign minors' orphanages in Istanbul and Izmir and noted improved material conditions.

He stressed however the need to provide all foreigners with better information, in writing and in a language they understand, on their legal situation, as well as on NGOs or international organisations that may provide to them legal or social aid if needed.

The Commissioner for Human Rights is an independent, non-judicial institution within the Council of Europe, mandated to promote awareness of, and respect for, human rights in the 47 member states of the Organisation.

Elected by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the present Commissioner, Mr Thomas Hammarberg, took up his function on 1 April 2006

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Special attention should be paid to foreign nationals coming from conflict areas, potentially in need of international protection. Mr Hammarberg appreciated the intent expressed by the Turkish authorities to explore further possible coordination and collaboration with UNHCR. Finally, as regards refugees' obligation to pay residence fees, the Commissioner welcomed the authorities' willingness to look into this matter which is a very serious burden for refugees without means and the right to work in the country.

The Commissioner's reports following this visit will be published later this year.

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