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TURKEY CSW welcomes government pledge to return confiscated property to Christian and Jewish communities

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) welcomes the landmark decision by the Turkish government, issued in a decree on August 27, to return confiscated real estate assets, which once belonged to Christian and Jewish foundations, to their rightful owners. Compensation has also been promised for properties seized and later sold to third parties.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced the new decree as he addressed representatives of more than 150 minority foundations in Istanbul on August 28. "The times when citizens in our country were oppressed for their beliefs, their ethnic heritage or the way they dressed is over," he said. The decree has bypassed Parliament and it is unknown how the nationalist opposition has reacted to the move. Under the decree, minority foundations must apply to recover their property within 12 months.

The announcement of the decree has met with approval from the EU, to which Turkey is applying for full membership, as well as the Greek Orthodox, Armenian and Syriac Orthodox and Catholic churches, and Jewish communities of Turkey, who recognize this as a long-overdue righting of an old wrong. Over the past few years the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has regularly fined Turkey for failing to return seized properties to their Christian and Jewish owners. The EU also re-emphasized the centrality of Turkey's religious freedom obligations in July.

Since a 1936 Declaration, non-Muslim foundations have been forced to register their properties, and hundreds of schools, churches, cemeteries, stores, hospitals, orphanages, houses, apartment buildings and factories have been seized by the Turkish state since that time. Many of these assets have been re-registered as public or foundation properties. The finances of religious minority communities have suffered as a result and many non-Muslim Turks have left the country.

A further ruling in 1974 had prohibited non-Muslim communities from acquiring new property. Changes in Turkish legislation enacted in 2003 and 2008 did not successfully revoke the 1936 Declaration, but the recent decree has removed all remaining legal impediments to the return of the properties to their rightful owners.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW welcomes the Turkish government's recent decree and particularly the recognition that the return of this confiscated property is not a concession to minority groups, but rather the return of rightful property to legally equal citizens. If Turkey is to see full freedom of religion implemented, it is vital that it be built upon the acknowledgement of all Turkish persons as equal citizens, irrespective religious belief. We urge the General Foundations Board of Turkey to process each application for return of assets quickly and fairly, so that all minority groups may have their property returned to them within the set timeframe. The international community should monitor the implementation of this decree to ensure it meets satisfactory standards."