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TURKEY | New Report Warns of Declining Democratic Principles, Human Rights

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's latest report on freedom of religion or belief in Turkey urges the Turkish government to act to address the increasing polarization amid concerns about erosion of democratic principles and backsliding human rights in the country.

The report, entitled "Turkey: Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Expression," notes that increasing numbers of Turkish academics and journalists, as well as representatives from religious communities, are increasingly worried by the deteriorating human rights situation in the country as the space for critical dissent shrinks and self-censorship increases.

In recent weeks, Zaman newspaper, one of the few remaining publications prepared to question the ruling party openly, became the latest casualty in an unprecedented government press crackdown. The paper was handed over to trustees through a court ruling and the English language version of the paper, Today's Zaman, was confiscated by the government. As a result, a number of hyperlinks in CSW's report are no longer accessible but have been retained in the document as evidence of ongoing press censorship.

Turkish people from all walks of life spoke to CSW about police inaction in the face of security concerns. Representatives of the Alevi community were reportedly told by police that they would need to protect themselves after they reported receiving death threats. Academics have been threatened openly by a known criminal, with no repercussions, while TV stations have received threatening phone calls from government officials.

Over the Easter period, the Turkish Ministry of the Interior reported that it had received intelligence that Daesh (Islamic State) planned to target churches. Although no such attack has occurred to date, the State has used the threat as a pretext to pressure churches to install CCTV and to accept a security presence during services.

The increasing power of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) was also highlighted in the

report, along with the negative effects on children and young people of religious minorities of changes made by Diyanet to the education system. These young people often have no religion reflected on their identity cards and are thus not entitled to exemption from Religion, Culture and Ethics (RCE) classes, lessons that focus on the teachings of Islam.

Turkey faces instability as a result of its position as a gateway for foreign fighters to and from Syria and for refugees hoping to reach Europe. In addition, there is a resurgence of conflict with Kurdish forces.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "Our new Turkey report shows that in order to fulfil its promise of democracy and stability, made to the Turkish people after the 2015 elections, the ruling party must take concrete steps to preserve pluralism in the country, to prevent the erosion of secularism and halt its crackdown on the media."