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TURKEY | Perpetrators of Malatya Murders Arrested

Five men who were convicted Sept. 28 of the murders of three Christians in Malatya, Turkey in 2007, were arrested Sept. 29 amid concerns that they might flee the country.

On Sept. 28, the First High Criminal Court in Malatya convicted and sentenced Emre Gunaydin, Cuma Ozdemir, Hamit Ceker, Salih Gurler and Abuzer Yildirim to three aggravated life sentences each for the premeditated murders of Turkish citizens Necati Aydin and Ugur Yuksel, and Tillman Geske, a German national.

The three Christians were killed at the offices of Zirve Publishing House on April 18, 2007. The five convicted men, who were apprehended at the scene of the crime, were released on bail in 2014, following controversial judicial amendments to terrorism laws that reduced the time suspects can be held without conviction to five years. Following their conviction, they were briefly allowed home pending the outcome of an appeal, but were arrested on the evening of Sept. 29 amid concerns that they might abscond.

A total of 21 defendants stood trial in connection with the Malatya Murders, some of whom were military officers. Retired Colonel Mehmet Ulger was sentenced to 13 years and nine months in prison for "violation of confidentiality of communication and forgery of official documents," while Major Haydar Yesil received 14 years and 10 months. However, 14 other suspects remanded in connection with the case were acquitted of being members of a terrorist organization, including Retired General Hursit Tolon. According to the Association of Protestant Churches, the presiding judge said the murders could not have been committed without the assistance of a criminal organization but admitted that the court had failed to find this link.

Mervyn Thomas, CSW's Chief Executive said, "CSW welcomes the conviction and arrests of the perpetrators of these appalling murders, following a lengthy trial that has taken a toll on the family and friends of the victims. Though the process has been inordinately long, the final outcome of this trial provides a welcome illustration that justice can prevail irrespective of the

religious background of perpetrators and victims. We urge the Turkish authorities to ensure that from now onwards such cases continue be treated without prejudice in order to send a clear message that harassment and attacks against religious minorities will not be tolerated.”