

CYPRUS 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Since 1974 the southern part of Cyprus has been under the control of the government of the Republic of Cyprus, while the northern part, administered by Turkish Cypriots, proclaimed itself the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”) in 1983. The United States does not recognize the “TRNC,” nor does any country other than Turkey. A substantial number of Turkish troops remained on the island. A buffer zone, or “green line,” patrolled by the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), separates the two parts.

REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS

Executive Summary

The constitution protects the freedom to worship, teach, and practice one’s religion. It grants the Church of Cyprus the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs. Turkish Cypriots were granted access to religious sites in the government-controlled area, including a visit by approximately 1,000 Turkish Cypriots and foreign nationals to Hala Sultan Tekke for Ramadan Bayram prayers. Six mosques in the government-controlled area were open for all five daily prayers and had the necessary facilities for ablutions. The government did not grant permission to religious groups to make upgrades at mosques. The Central Prison management amended prison regulations to allow visits by representatives of any religious group.

The leaders of the main religious groups on the island continued to meet and visit places of worship across the “green line.” The archbishop of the Church of Cyprus invited the Muslim community’s mufti to visit several mosques in the south that have been closed for more than 40 years. The Jewish community reported incidents of property damage and verbal harassment during Jewish religious holidays.

Vice President Biden held a roundtable in Cyprus in May with the archbishop of the Church of Cyprus, the mufti, the Maronite archbishop, the Armenian archbishop, and the Roman Catholic Church representative to Cyprus to promote religious dialogue and tolerance. Embassy staff met with the government, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues, including access to religious sites island-wide. Embassy officials visited sites of religious significance, and

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encouraged religious leaders to make reciprocal visits to places of religious significance on either side of the “green line.”

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population of the island to be 1.2 million (July 2014 estimate). According to an October 2011 census by the government of the Republic of Cyprus, the population of the government-controlled area is more than 858,000. According to information from the 2011 census released in May, 89 percent of the population in the government-controlled area is Greek Orthodox Christian and 1.8 percent is Muslim. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics, Protestants, Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Bahais, and Buddhists. Recent immigrants and migrant workers are predominantly Roman Catholic, Muslim, and Buddhist. Most of the approximately 2,300 Jews are foreign-born residents.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution protects the right of individuals to profess their faith and provides for freedom of worship, teaching, and practice or observance, either individually or collectively, in private or in public. The constitution specifies all religions whose doctrines or rites are not secret are free and equal before the law. It protects the right to change one’s religion and prohibits the use of physical or moral compulsion to make a person change, or prevent a person from changing, his or her religion.

The constitution states the Church of Cyprus has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its canons and charter. By law, the Church of Cyprus only pays taxes on commercial activities.

The constitution sets guidelines for the Vakf, a Muslim institution regulating religious activity for Turkish Cypriots. The Vakf is also tax exempt and has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its laws and principles. No legislative, executive, or other act may contravene or interfere with the Church of Cyprus or the Vakf. The Vakf operates only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and does not administer mosques located in the government-controlled area; the government serves as

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caretaker for the latter. Mosques in government-controlled areas receive financial support from the government.

The constitution recognizes three other religious groups: Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and “Latins” (Cypriot Roman Catholics). All are exempt from taxes and eligible for government subsidies for their religious institutions.

Religious groups not among the five recognized in the constitution are not required to register with the government. To engage in financial transactions and maintain bank accounts, however, they must register as nonprofit organizations. In order to register, a religious group must submit through an attorney an application stating its purpose and providing the names of its directors. Religious groups registered as nonprofit organizations are tax exempt and must provide annual reports; they are not eligible for government subsidies. Foreign missionaries must obtain and periodically renew residence permits to live in the country.

The government requires Greek Orthodox religious instruction in public primary and secondary schools. The Ministry of Education (MOE) may excuse primary school students of other religious groups from attending religious services and instruction at the request of their guardians, but Greek Orthodox children do not have the option of opting out. All secondary school students may be excused by the ministry from religious instruction on grounds of religion or conscience, and they may be excused from attending religious services on any grounds at the request of their guardians, or at their own request if over the age of 16.

The law provides for an independent government ombudsman and tasks this official with protecting citizens’ rights from actions or decisions made by the government which are contrary to the law, violate human rights, or do not constitute proper administrative behavior.

Conscientious objectors on religious grounds are exempt from active military duty and from reservist service in the National Guard but must complete alternative service. There are two options available for conscientious objectors: unarmed military service, which is a maximum of five months longer than the normal 24-month service; or social service, which is a maximum of nine months longer than normal service, but requires fewer hours per day.

Government Practices

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Turkish Cypriots were granted access to religious sites in the government-controlled area; however, Muslim community leaders stated the government had not granted them full access to and administration of mosques located on cultural heritage sites. Eight mosques in the government-controlled area were open. Six of those were available for all five daily prayers and had the necessary facilities for ablutions. A Muslim leader requested, but had not yet been granted, permission to make improvements at the functioning mosques.

Turkish Cypriots stated the Ministry of Communications and Works Department of Antiquities kept the Hala Sultan Tekke mosque open only during conventional museum hours, thus limiting access to the mosque to only two of the five daily prayer times. The imam had to apply to the Ministry of the Interior for permission to open the mosque after 5:00 p.m. In order to cross the “green line” without identification checks to visit religious sites, Turkish Cypriots were required to submit their requests to the UNFICYP, which then facilitated the approval process with the government. The UNFICYP reported that of the three requests made by Turkish Cypriot authorities, two pilgrimages to Hala Sultan Tekke were approved, but a requested celebration of Kurban Bayram (Eid al Adha) at Hala Sultan Tekke did not take place because of the lack of an agreement on the crossing point to be used for the purpose.

Throughout the year, the government facilitated the crossing of thousands of Turkish Cypriots and foreign nationals south of the “green line” to visit Hala Sultan Tekke to conduct prayers and services. On July 28, the police escorted about 1,000 Turkish Cypriots, Turks, and other foreign nationals to Hala Sultan Tekke for Ramadan Bayram prayers. On November 22, the press reported the government again facilitated the crossing of over 1,000 Turkish Cypriots and Turks from the north to celebrate the first day of the Islamic calendar at Hala Sultan Tekke.

The Ministry of Commerce approved all applications submitted during the year from religious groups registering as nonprofit organizations.

The international NGO Conscience and Peace Tax International and the Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to report on the longer duration of alternative service for conscientious objectors compared to military service, which they considered to be a punitive measure. In a report prepared in April, Conscience and Tax Peace International noted the government had not reduced the length of service for conscientious objectors. The report also stated the submission of conscientious

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objector status applications to the Ministry of Defense did not constitute an independent and impartial decision making process. The ombudsman's office did not receive any complaints from conscientious objectors about the procedures the government used to confirm their conscientious objector status and eligibility for alternative military service.

A number of religious groups said the government's reported reluctance to issue visas and residency permits to individuals from countries outside the European Union (EU) had affected them. The Jewish community said student volunteers faced difficulties obtaining government permission to extend their residency, and the Catholic Church said it had difficulties regarding the extension of residency permits of clergy from foreign countries.

Military recruits were required to take part in a common prayer led by Church of Cyprus clergy during swearing-in ceremonies. Recruits of other faiths, atheists, and those who did not wish to take the oath for reasons of conscience were not required to raise their hand during the swearing-in ceremony. They instead gave a pledge of allegiance at a separate gathering.

The Central Prison management amended prison regulations to allow visits by representatives of any religious group, not only representatives of the group with which the prisoner had declared affiliation upon admission to prison. In previous years, some prisoners had complained that prison management restricted their religious rights. The ombudsman had also recommended a change in policy. The ombudsman did not report any new complaints concerning prisoners' religious rights.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, who had previously reported problems obtaining exemptions for children from religious instruction, stated the MOE granted all requested exemptions during the year. They also reported their children had not experienced difficulties in being excused from attending school performances containing religious content. The ombudsman's office received one complaint that a Jehovah's Witness student who had been exempted from religious instruction was punished with unexcused absences for not attending religious instruction classes, and the ombudsman's office was investigating the complaint at year's end. The ombudsman continued to monitor implementation of the MOE's policy on exemptions and maintained an ongoing dialogue with the MOE on religious freedom in education.

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In February the ombudsman issued a report on a 2013 complaint by the Turkish Cypriot parents of students in Nicosia's English School over the school board's failure to include the religious Kurban Bayram holiday as an official school holiday. The English School was the only secondary school in Nicosia designed to be bicomunal and had approximately 150 Turkish Cypriot students who commuted from the area administered by the Turkish Cypriots. In 2013, the presidential commissioner had urged the school board to make Kurban Bayram an official school holiday, but the school board had decided instead to give all Muslim students and faculty three days of excused absence during the Kurban Bayram holidays instead. The ombudsman's report recommended the school board revise its decision and consider making all main Muslim holidays official school holidays. In September the Supreme Court rejected the Turkish Cypriot parents' petition for a judicial order requiring the English School to establish Kurban Bayram as an official school holiday. The Supreme Court ruled the English school was not a public authority and was not obligated to accede to the parents' request.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Those who were not members of the prevailing religious group said they often feared negative social reactions if they chose to refrain from participating in public ceremonies that were religious in nature. Likewise, Greek Cypriots who converted from Greek Orthodoxy to other faiths said they sometimes faced social ostracism. However, relations between the Church of Cyprus and other religious communities in the government-controlled area reportedly were cordial.

Representatives of the Jewish community reported incidents of property damage and verbal harassment. The Jewish Community Center in Larnaca reported the water meter of the Jewish cemetery was destroyed and removed two times during the year. The center also reported three of their students were harassed on their way home during the holiday of Sukkot.

The Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH), one of the bicomunal working groups set up as part of the UN-facilitated peace talks, identified cultural heritage sites throughout the island in need of emergency preservation measures. These sites included four mosques in the government-controlled area. On September 11, the TCCH announced the start of emergency preservation works at the Evretou and Tserkezoi mosques in the government-controlled area.

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The leaders of the main religious groups on the island continued to meet regularly and visit places of worship on both sides of the buffer zone. In February all principal religious leaders, including the archbishop of the Church of Cyprus, the mufti, the Maronite archbishop, the Armenian archbishop, and the patriarchal Latin vicar in Cyprus, made a statement announcing their support for the Joint Declaration by the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders on the resumption of UN-led settlement negotiations. In March the archbishop of the Church of Cyprus hosted a meeting in the government-controlled area for all religious leaders on the island, during which they exchanged views on the restoration of monuments and holy sites. The archbishop of the Church of Cyprus said all the religious communities were interested in the restoration of monuments and holy sites, and he and the mufti were working together to this end.

Also in March the Mufti attended the name day celebration of the Maronite archbishop in the south. On June 3, the mufti visited and prayed at the Taht El Kale mosque in Nicosia, the first visit by a mufti to this mosque in 51 years. In September the archbishop of the Church of Cyprus and the mufti together visited the Great Mosque of Paphos, also known as Ebubekir Mosque (formerly Ayia Sophia Church), and the Hasan Aga mosque. The Great Mosque was opened for prayers for the first time in 40 years.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy officials met frequently with the government to discuss religious freedom issues, including access to religious sites on either side of the “green line” dividing Cyprus.

On May 22, Vice President Biden met with religious leaders including the archbishop of the Church of Cyprus, the mufti, the Maronite archbishop, the Armenian archbishop, and the Roman Catholic Church representative to Cyprus and discussed the ongoing religious dialogue among the main religious leaders. Embassy officers also met with NGOs to discuss religious freedom issues such as access, dialogue, and tolerance.

Embassy staff observed religious ceremonies at places of worship where special permission was sometimes required, such as at the Hala Sultan Tekke mosque. Embassy staff regularly visited sites of religious significance and met with representatives of the Muslim community to listen to their concerns about access to

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religious sites. Embassy officials encouraged the reciprocal visits between Greek Orthodox and Muslim leaders to places of worship on either side of the “green line.”

THE AREA ADMINISTERED BY TURKISH CYPRIOTS

Executive Summary

Since 1974 the northern part of Cyprus has been run by a Turkish Cypriot administration that proclaimed itself the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”) in 1983. The United States does not recognize the “TRNC,” nor does any country other than Turkey. The Turkish Cypriot “constitution” guarantees freedom of religion. It prohibits forced participation in worship and religious services and states religious education may only be conducted under “state” supervision. It grants the Muslim Vakf, which regulates religious activity for Turkish Cypriots, the exclusive right to regulate its internal affairs in accordance with Vakf laws. UNFICYP reported that the number of pilgrims able to worship rose during the year. The Turkish Cypriot authorities approved 57 of 93 requests received through UNFICYP for access to Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox places of worship in the north. Turkish Cypriot authorities reported they allowed church services for the first time in more than 40 years at 14 locations. Some religious groups reported police surveillance of their activities.

Religious groups complained some religious sites to which they had little or no access were damaged or close to collapse and remained unpreserved. Some religious groups reported Turkish Cypriot converts from Islam to other religions, particularly Christianity, faced social ostracism and political criticism. Religious leaders continued to promote religious dialogue by meeting and arranging visits to places of worship across the “green line.”

Embassy representatives met with Turkish Cypriot representatives, NGOs, international organizations, and religious leaders to discuss access to religious sites and the ability to hold religious services at the sites without restrictions.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to census information released in 2013 by the Turkish Cypriot authorities, which contains no data on religious affiliation, the population of the area administered by Turkish Cypriots is 286,257. Sociologists estimate 98

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percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. An estimated 10,000 to 12,000 immigrant workers of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab origin are Alevi Muslims, and there are also small numbers of followers of other schools of Islam. Other small groups include approximately 330 members of the autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus, 200 members of the Russian Orthodox Church, 150 Bahais, 100 Maronite Catholics, 180 Anglicans, 150 mostly expatriate Jews, 300 Turkish speaking Protestants, and 40 Jehovah's Witnesses. There are approximately 450 African students who are predominantly Pentecostals and Roman Catholics.

Section II. Status of “Government” Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Turkish Cypriot “constitution” refers specifically to a “secular republic” and guarantees freedom of religion and conscience. It prohibits forced prayer, forced attendance of religious services, and condemnation based on religious beliefs. Religious education may only be conducted under “state” supervision. The “law” does not recognize any specific religion. It states, however, that the Vakf, a Muslim religious foundation which regulates religious activity for Turkish Cypriots, has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with Vakf laws and principles. The Vakf has preferential tax status; it is tax exempt in its religious activities, but its commercial operations are subject to applicable taxes. It also receives income from properties it manages. According to the “constitution,” the Turkish Cypriot authorities shall help the Vakf in the execution of Muslim religious services and in meeting the expenses of such services. No other religious organization is tax exempt or receives subsidies from the Turkish Cypriot authorities.

The 1975 Vienna III Agreement covers the treatment of Greek Cypriots and Maronite Catholics living in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and the treatment of Turkish Cypriots living in the government-controlled area. Among other provisions, the agreement provides for facilities for religious worship for Greek Cypriots, stating “the Greek Cypriots at present in the north of the island are free to stay and they will be given every help to lead a normal life, including facilities for education and for the practice of their religion, as well as medical care by their own doctors and freedom of movement in the north.”

Turkish Cypriot “regulations” stipulate Greek Orthodox residents may hold liturgies or masses conducted by two designated priests at three designated

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functional churches in the Karpas peninsula without seeking permission, and Maronite residents may hold liturgies or masses at four designated functional Maronite churches without seeking permission. Religious groups must submit applications to the authorities for permission to hold religious services at churches or monasteries other than these seven designated churches. Permission is also necessary for priests other than those officially designated to conduct services. Specific permission is required for services including participation by Cypriots who are not residents in the Turkish Cypriot-administered area, such as members of the Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox churches living in the government-controlled area. Applications to hold worship services at these sites are required 10 days before the date of such religious services and coordinated through the UNFICYP.

The “Presidency of Religious Affairs” represents Islam in the area administered by the Turkish Cypriots. Under its direction, resident imams may conduct prayers and sermons in mosques.

Religious groups are not required to register with authorities as associations, although only registered associations have the right to engage in commercial activity and maintain bank accounts. According to the “constitution,” religious education can only be conducted under the Turkish Cypriot authorities’ control and supervision. Associations do not receive tax-exempt status or any “government” benefits or subsidies. Religious groups are not permitted to register as associations if the stated purpose of the association is to provide religious education to their members.

There is compulsory instruction covering religion in grades four through eight in all schools. This instruction focuses primarily on Islam, but also includes sessions on comparative religion. The instruction is mandatory and attendance is required of all students, regardless of their faith, but non-Muslim students may be excused from attending religious instruction at the request of their guardians. At the high school level, such instruction is optional.

There are no provisions or “laws” allowing Turkish Cypriots to engage in conscientious objection to military service, which includes a one-day annual reserve duty requirement in addition to the 12-15 month initial service requirement.

“Government” Practices

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The Turkish Cypriot authorities continued the practice of limiting access to Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox religious sites and placed other restrictions on these religious groups. At the same time, the authorities permitted religious services to be held in a number of churches for the first time in 40 to 50 years.

After 10 years of applications, the authorities allowed a Turkish-speaking Protestant congregation to form the Turkish Protestant Association. The group reported better treatment by the police after registration. A religious leader from the association said its registration had caused police surveillance to become more subtle than in prior years although the surveillance continued. In one incident, the police interrupted a service but allowed it to continue after seeing the congregation's registration document.

Alevis continued to be registered as a nongovernmental association. There were no reports of other religious groups attempting to register during the year.

The authorities restricted access to Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox places of worship. Greek Orthodox and Maronite Catholics could not freely visit most religious sites located in military zones in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. One Greek Orthodox monastery was open for prayer but still required special permission for Mass.

Turkish Cypriots eased restrictions on holding regular religious services in certain churches, although they did not approve all requests. UNFICYP reported that of the 93 requests, 57 were approved. Eleven additional requests sent directly to the Turkish Cypriot authorities were also approved.

On January 8, the authorities allowed church services for the first time in 57 years at the Church of Saint George Exorinos in the walled city of Famagusta. Approximately 5,000 Greek Cypriots, including high-level officials, politicians, and religious leaders, attended a Good Friday service at the same church on April 18.

The authorities permitted a religious ceremony to be held at the Armenian church and monastery inside the walled city of Nicosia for the first time in 50 years. The Armenian archbishop conducted the ceremony, and more than 500 people of

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Armenian descent living in the north and the south as well as high-level officials attended the service.

The authorities allowed church services in the following 14 churches for the first time in 40 years: Church of Saint George Exorinos in Gazimagusa/Famagusta; Church of Panagia Theotokou in Kythrea/Degirmenlik; Church of St. Charalambos in Turkmenkoy/Kontea; Church of Saint George in Kyrenia/Girne; Church of Saint George in Duzova/Exometochi; Church of Ayios Antonis in Degirmenlik/Kythrea; Church of Ayios Ioannis Prodromos in Akova/Gypsou; Church of Panayia Evangelistria in Alaykoy/Gerolakkos Nicosia; Church of St. Nicolas in Mormeneske/Limnia; Church of Ayios Nicolaos in Yayla/Syrianohori; Armenian church and monastery in Lefkosa/Nicosia; Church of Ayios Georgios in Vadili/Vatyli; Church of Ayia Marina in Degirmenlik/Kythrea; and Church of Archangel Michael in Kumyali/Koma tou Yialou.

In May Greek Cypriots held a religious ceremony at the St. Irini Church in Akdeniz/Ayios Irini village. Press reports said the Turkish Cypriot police monitored the service and the church was in disrepair.

The Turkish Cypriot authorities denied permission to use certain Christian religious sites for religious services, including the Akanthou/Tatlisu church. The authorities had granted permission for a church service but later rescinded it, as the church was being used as a cultural center and museum.

In April the archbishop of the Church of Cyprus sent a statement to the press saying the authorities in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots had rejected his request to visit the Apostolos Varnavas Monastery near Famagusta. In May Turkish Cypriot police stopped a Maronite religious ceremony at the St. Antonis Chapel in Kythrea/Degirmenlik, minutes before the service was to end, reportedly because the Maronites had not applied for permission through the designated UN and Turkish Cypriot channels. One hundred Maronites were participating in the ceremony that was also a celebration of the chapel's restoration. A Maronite representative later described the incident as a "misunderstanding."

One religious group complained religious items were being held in museums against the wishes of the community.

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The “Presidency of Religious Affairs” staffed 190-200 mosques with 370 imams. Members of the majority Sunni religious community voiced concerns the “government” was interfering with religious affairs by selecting the imams.

Some religious groups reported that Turkish Cypriot authorities, including the police, monitored their activities. A resident Greek Orthodox priest reported heavy police presence during church services and stated the police questioned him frequently about his activities. Turkish Cypriot representatives stated the purpose of the police presence was to provide security and protect religious icons and artifacts; however, religious groups said the monitoring was intimidation and harassment.

Some non-Sunni Muslims lacked places of worship and funding to construct such facilities. Alevi reported that, due to the lack of a *cemevi* (house of worship), they were required to conduct funerals inside mosques, contrary to their traditions. Alevi representatives stated they felt no pressure and could freely practice their faith; however, they perceived favoritism in “state” funding toward the Sunni Muslim population through financing mosque construction and administration of mosques. The Alevi Cultural Association, an Alevi NGO, met with Turkish Cypriot authorities to request support to complete its *cemevi*.

Some non-Sunni Muslim religious groups complained their children were still required to complete the mandatory religion course, focused on Sunni Islam, in public schools.

Fifteen people in the north announced they were conscientious objectors, eight of whom were women and so ineligible for military service; two were declared disabled by the military, and five had ongoing cases in the “military court” at year’s end.

On February 25, Murat Kanatli, a conscientious objector who had refused to participate in the annual military reserve duty since 2009, was found guilty by the “military court.” The “judge” decided Kanatli was not a conscientious objector and ordered Kanatli to pay 500 Turkish liras (\$215) or serve 10 days in jail. Kanatli refused to pay and was jailed for 10 days from February 25 to March 6. Many NGOs, unions, and political parties criticized and protested the decision, and Kanatli appealed the decision. On October 9, the “Military High Court” rejected the appeal. Kanatli told the press he would take the case to the European Court of Human Rights. The “military court” found another conscientious objector, Haluk

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Tufanli, guilty in December and ordered him to pay 500 Turkish liras or serve 10 days in jail.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some religious groups complained some religious sites to which they had little or no access were damaged or close to collapse.

Turkish Cypriot religious groups reported Muslim parents seeking to send their children to religious summer courses faced strong public criticism from secular community members, particularly local teachers.

Some religious groups reported Turkish Cypriot converts from Islam to other religions, particularly Christianity, faced social ostracism and political criticism. A Turkish Cypriot Protestant leader said members of the Protestant congregation feared openly attending church due to societal discrimination.

The bicommunal TCCH and the UN Development Program (UNDP) Partnership for the Future announced the restoration of the Apostolos Andreas Monastery in the Karpas Peninsula. In 2013, the UNDP had signed agreements with the Church of Cyprus and the Vakf for restoration of the Apostolos Andreas Monastery. The restoration was funded by the Church of Cyprus and the Vakf. UNDP signed a contract with Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot contractors in July and work began in September. In addition, the committee organized small-scale grassroots initiatives to help maintain cultural heritage sites, including religious sites, in poor condition on both sides of the island.

In October the TCCH announced the completion of emergency measures and conservation works, funded by the EU, at the Church of Agios Nicolas in Syrianochori/Siryanochoro/Yayla.

Religious leaders continued to promote religious dialogue by meeting and arranging visits to places of worship across the “green line.” In February all religious leaders of Cyprus, including the archbishop of the Church of Cyprus, the mufti, the Maronite archbishop, the Armenian archbishop, and the patriarchal Latin vicar, made a statement announcing their support for the Joint Declaration by the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders on the resumption of UN-led settlement negotiations. In April the mufti hosted a lunch for religious leaders in Cyprus and voiced commitment to work together with all religious leaders.

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In September the press reported that Greek Orthodox cemeteries in Karakoumi/Karakum, Marathovouno/Ulukisla, Lysi/Akdogan, Makrasyka/Incirli, Trachoni Kythreas/Demirhan, Trikomo/Yeni Iskele, Flamoudi/Mersinlik, Arnadi/Kuzucuk, and Vatili/Vadili had been damaged by looters stealing metal crosses.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy representatives met with Turkish Cypriot authorities to discuss access to religious sites and the ability to hold religious services at sites without restrictions. Embassy staff worked to ensure the Armenian Orthodox community was allowed to contribute its views to the Vakf regarding the use of the newly restored Armenian church and monastery complex in north Nicosia.

Embassy officers also met with religious leaders, NGOs, and international organizations to discuss access issues. Embassy staff observed religious ceremonies at Saint Mamas Monastery in Morphou/Guzelyurt, Saint George Exorinos Church in Famagusta, the Armenian church and monastery in north Nicosia, and Apostolos Andreas Monastery in the Karpas Peninsula, historically important churches attracting large numbers of worshippers from the government-controlled area, and visited the Maronite enclave in Kormakitis.