



Turkish Authorities 'Harass' Orthodox Patriarchate Staff

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ISTANBUL -- Pope Benedict XVI is still soaking up the success of last week's historic trip to Turkey, but Orthodox Christian volunteer workers say that beneath the surface of the four-day visit was a hard struggle with Turkish authorities.

During Benedict's visit last week, they said, the Turkish Press Ministry tried to shut down the Holy See Ecumenical Patriarchate press office at least four times, once succeeding in temporarily closing it. Metropolitans and other church officials were also forced to give up their passports or other identification papers at security checkpoints, and local Christians were shut out from the historic November 30 meeting between Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Benedict.

"My personal outrage from this is because I believe in freedom of religion and the press," said Father Alex Karloutsos, communications assistant for Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew during Benedict's trip. "It was evident in Turkey that there was neither."

An official from the Turkish Press Ministry who declined to give her name denied that the Patriarchate's press office was ever shut down.

"It wasn't closed down, would something like that happen?" she said. "They were at the hotel for several days and nothing like that happened."

Fr. Karloutsos had a front-row seat to many of the events during the papal visit, both on and off camera. But the most frustrating event, he said, was seeing Christian pilgrims denied entry to the patriarchate to attend the Feast of St. Andrew, in which Benedict was Bartholomew's guest of honor.

When Christian pilgrims came to the walled-off patriarchate, Turkish security forces turned many of them away. Refusing to recognize their invitations to attend the liturgy, police told them that they needed a pass from Turkish authorities and required them to surrender their passports or other identification, he said.

"The police were grabbing their passes off their necks forcibly and told them they weren't allowed to come into the church like this," said Fr. Karloutsos. "The faithful in Istanbul were not allowed to go to their own church."

Getting to the patriarchate was a challenge in itself. Elderly metropolitans and other attendees to the Feast of St. Andrew had to walk as far as three miles to get there, due to closed roads from the enormous security blockade surrounding Benedict's visit.

The walk took as long as an hour, and some metropolitans arrived "completely exhausted," he said.

On the surface, Benedict's trip to Turkey could have hardly looked more successful: He and Bartholomew hosted each other at their respective religious services in symbols of Christian unity. The Turkish press, usually hostile toward Christianity, warmed up to the pontiff considerably.

All the problems, workers say, were below the radar.

Nick Furriss, communications coordinator for the papal trip to the ecumenical patriarchate, said a virtual tug-of-war took place between the Turkish foreign ministry and the Holy See Ecumenical Patriarchate press office in Istanbul, which hosted 3,000 foreign journalists during the papal voyage.

The day before Benedict arrived, Turkish authorities temporarily shut down the Orthodox press office set up in the Hilton Hotel over an argument on press credentials. The Turkish government issued its own press passes to journalists, expressing displeasure that the Orthodox were issuing their own registration cards for their press conferences.

Turkish Press Minister Necmettin Altuntas said on November 27 that he wanted the distribution of the press passes from the Orthodox to stop.

"We already have our own accreditation card, and we told them that it wasn't necessary for them to give one," he said. The Turkish press office cites security as one of many reasons for limiting press cards to its own allotment.

The press office also had a brief run-in with technical sabotage from an unknown source. A Turkish technician who preferred to be unnamed said that, on the morning of November 29, all the settings on his computer that accessed the systems for the press center had been changed. He said that the problems were too complicated to have been a fluke.

The breakdown temporarily shut down the center's wireless Internet connection, the lifeblood for the hundreds of laptop-toting foreign journalists.

"The word for all of this is harassment," said Furriss. "It was beyond anything we could expect."

Warning Signs

Prior to Benedict's arrival, there were warning signs that the pope's safety could be in danger. Two days before he arrived (November 26) the conservative Felicity Party organized a 25,000-person protest to his visit. On November 2, a man was arrested in front of the Italian consulate in Istanbul to protest the pope's visit, claiming he "fired the shots for God," according to the Associated Press.

During Benedict's four-day trip, Turkish security forces left nothing to chance. Safety measures included thousands of policemen in riot gear, military helicopters, decoy motorcades and frequent security checkpoints that brought Ankara and Istanbul's traffic to a halt.

But volunteer workers think that the real problem was not security but a problematic word that appeared on the front of the church-issued passes describing the patriarchate as "ecumenical."

Turkey objects to the title "ecumenical" patriarch for Bartholomew, recognizing him only as the leader of Turkey's tiny Greek population, now numbering only 2,500. Turkish nationalists accuse him of conspiring to set up an independent Orthodox state modeled after the Vatican.

Greek Orthodox Christians have a history of difficulties with the Turkish government. In 1971, Turkey nationalized private schools, including Halki seminary, where all Orthodox clergy, including Bartholomew, were trained. Under current Turkish law, only Sunni Muslim clergy can be trained for religious leadership.

While the international community has repeatedly called on Turkey to reopen the seminary, the patriarchate said that their requests have been ignored.

The patriarchate has also been on the receiving end of nationalist anger. Over the charge that he planned to establish a Vatican-like independent Orthodox state, in September 2004 more than 1,000 protestors demonstrated in front of the patriarchate and burned an effigy of Bartholomew.

Despite all the problems experienced in Turkey, Orthodox staffers were pleased at the success of Benedict's papal voyage. The 1,000-year-old rift between the Catholic and Orthodox churches was narrowed, they said, and in at least one Islamic country, Benedict's reputation improved significantly.

The Turkish media responded very positively to Benedict's decision to face Mecca while praying in the Blue Mosque alongside Istanbul's top mufti.

The banner headline of the Turkish national daily *Milyet* the next morning was, "Istanbul's peace." The Islamist daily *Zaman* noted, "The Pope didn't cross himself," approving Benedict's decision not to genuflect after his prayer in the Blue Mosque.

The highest compliment, however, may have come from well-known columnist Cemal Ussak. "Ratzinger became pope while in Turkey," Ussak declared.

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