



Christian Monastery in Turkey Fights to Keep Land

Posted GMT 1-22-2009 1:44:9

MIDYAT, Turkey (Reuters) -- In a remote village near the Turkish-Syrian border, a land dispute with neighboring villages is threatening the future of one of the world's oldest functioning Christian monasteries.

Critics say the dispute, which has become a rallying cry for Christian church groups across Europe, is a new chapter in the long history of religious persecution of the small Christian community by the Turkish state.

Tucked amid rugged hills where minarets rise in the distance, a small group of monks chants in Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ, inside the fifth-century Mor Gabriel monastery. It is a relic of an era when hundreds of thousands of Syriac Christians lived and worshipped in Turkey.

"This is our land. We have been here for more than 1,600 years," said Kuryakos Ergun, head of the Mor Gabriel Foundation, surveying the barren land and villages from the monastery's rooftop. "We have our maps and our records to prove it. This is not about land. It's about the monastery."

The dispute, on which a court is due to rule on February 11, is testing freedom of religion and human rights for non-Muslim minorities in this overwhelmingly Muslim country that aspires to join the European Union.

The row began when Turkish government land officials redrew the boundaries around Mor Gabriel and the surrounding villages in 2008 to update a national land registry.

The monks say the new boundaries turn over to the villages large plots of land the monastery has owned for centuries, and designate monastery land as public forest. Christian groups believe officials want to ultimately stamp out the Syriac Orthodox monastery.

Their allegations come as the EU has said the ruling AK Party government, which has Islamist roots, needs to do more to promote religious freedom alongside its liberal economic and political reforms.

"This case relates to the political criteria Turkey has to meet to become a member of the European Union," said Helena Storm, First Secretary of the Sweden embassy in Ankara, who has traveled to the monastery to follow court hearings.

"It is important that freedom of religion and property rights for minorities are respected in Turkey," she said.

Local government officials reached by Reuters in the town of Midyat and in the provincial capital of Mardin declined comment on the case, noting it was going through the court.

Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan has pledged to press ahead with difficult EU reforms, including rights of minorities.

"ANTI-TURKISH"

In the name of Turkey's strict secular laws, authorities have over decades expropriated millions of dollars worth of property belonging to Christians. Syriacs, Armenians and Greek Orthodox Christians -- remnants of the Muslim-led but multi-faith Ottoman Empire -- are viewed by many as foreigners.

Syriacs are one of Turkey's oldest communities, descendants of a branch of Middle Eastern Christianity. These Christians, united by a language derived from Aramaic, are split into several Orthodox and Catholic denominations.

There were 250,000 Syriacs when Ataturk founded Turkey after World War I from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire.

Today they number 20,000. Syriacs migrated throughout the 20th century to Europe, fleeing first persecution by the new secular republic, and later to escape violence between Kurdish separatist rebels and the Turkish military in the southeast.

A local prosecutor in August 2008 initiated a separate court case against the monastery after mayors of three villages complained the

monks were engaged in "anti-Turkish activities" and alleged they were illegally converting children to the Christian faith.

Monks say the mayors are instigating anti-Christian feelings by accusing Mor Gabriel of being against Islam. Villagers in neighboring Candarli, a settlement of 12 humble houses with no paved roads, said they had nothing against Christians and accused the monastery of taking land they need for cattle.

"There is a continued campaign to destroy the backbone of the Syriac people and close down the monastery," said Daniel Gabriel, director of the human rights division of the Syriac Universal Alliance, a leading Syriac group based in Sweden.

"These proceedings cannot take place without the sanction of the Turkish government. If the government wanted to protect the Syriac Christian community they would stop this case," he said.

Many churches and monasteries in southeast Turkey -- known to Syriac Christians as Turabdin or "the mountain of worshippers" -- are now abandoned and in ruins.

"You need people to have a church. Without the community, the church is only a building," said Saliba Ozmen, the metropolitan or bishop of the nearby city of Mardin.

INVASIONS AND RAIDS

The Conference of European Churches, a fellowship of 126 Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and Old Catholic churches from European countries, has said it is "deeply concerned about the threat to the survival of the monastery." The group has raised the issue with the EU and Turkish officials.

Considered the "second Jerusalem" by Syriacs, Mor Gabriel was built in 397 AD near the border of today's Syria and Iraq.

The ochre-colored limestone building has seen invasions by Romans, Byzantines, Crusaders and Islamic armies, and the monastery was once raided by the Mongol leader Tamerlane.

After falling into disuse, Mor Gabriel was revived in the 1920s and today it teaches the Syriac faith and Aramaic language to a group of 35 boys, who live and study at the monastery.

By law, Syriacs must attend state schools where teaching is in Turkish, but they can be taught about their own language and religion outside school hours.

Three black-clad monks, 14 nuns and a bishop live within the walls, preserving the ancient Syriac liturgy and tending to the orchards and gardens. They worship in a chapel with Byzantine mosaics. In its heyday, Mor Gabriel housed 2,000 monks and nuns.

Mor Gabriel receives more than 100,000 visitors a year, many of them from the Syriac diaspora in Germany and Sweden.

A trickle of Syriac families have returned in the last few years from the diaspora, encouraged by a drop in violence and Turkey's easing of language and cultural restrictions on its minorities as part of EU-linked reforms.

Syriac church leader Ozmen said there are powerful conservative forces opposed to change in Turkey, but he is optimistic. He pointed to this month's launch of a once-banned Kurdish language channel on state television.

"Multiculturalism has been part of Turkey since the Ottoman times," he said. "It is our best guarantee for the future."

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