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Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.


[13 August 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Turkey: Dealing with the cultural heritage of the minority groups that used to live on the territory of today's Turks

Turkey is planning to convert the Sophia Church – or Hagia Sophia – in Istanbul back into a mosque, after it served as a museum since 1935. In mid-July 2020, Turkey's Supreme Administrative Court cleared the way for the conversion of the Hagia Sophia.

The Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) appealed to the government of Turkey not to press ahead with the conversion process. Further, the STP appealed to the Muslim communities in Turkey to show solidarity with their fellow citizens and to protest against the conversion of the Hagia Sophia Museum into a mosque – because the oppressed and persecuted Christians and other religious communities in Turkey urgently need our support in their struggle against the government's decision.

This support is urgently needed in order to promote and strengthen mutual respect, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence in Turkey and throughout the world. Even now, 567 years after the conquest of Constantinople, the Hagia Sophia is still of great importance for the Christian communities in the Middle East, which are under pressure today. For Christians, it is a symbol of their long history in the region, and it is an important part of their identity.

If the government of Turkey were to ensure that the Hagia Sophia could remain a museum and one of Istanbul's landmarks, this would be a positive signal to all Christians in the Middle East and all over the world. Turkey could show that it respects the heritage of the peoples who once lived on its territory. This could contribute to reconciliation with the descendants of the victims of persecution and genocide in the Ottoman Empire and in Turkey today. The current decision would have the opposite effect. Recently, radical Islamists destroyed many Christian churches in Iraq, the Syrian Arab Republic, and other countries – often supported or tolerated by Turkey. Yazidi churches, monuments, cemeteries, and other sanctuaries were destroyed and looted as well.

The Hagia Sophia was built in the Byzantine Empire in the 6th century. After the conquest of Constantinople by troops of the Ottoman Empire, it was converted into a mosque in 1453. Since 1935, it served as a museum. Since then, a possible conversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque was discussed again and again. Before the local elections in 2014 and 2019, the Turkish government had demanded a re-conversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque in order to win the votes of devout Muslims. In June 2016, it was used as a mosque again for a short time during the month of Ramadan.

The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council and other UN organizations should address the topic of a conversion from a museum to a mosque. As the Hagia Sophia has been a World Heritage Site since 1985 and as it is part of the heritage of humanity, the government of Turkey should have consulted the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on this issue before making its decision.

The decision of Turkey's government to convert the Hagia Sophia Church into a mosque is unrealistic and populist – and it will have negative consequences for everyone. Cultural heritage must not be treated like this. The Hagia Sophia, as cultural heritage, has universal value for all peoples and civilizations. It must be cared for and preserved for future generations. This is also of great importance with regard to peaceful coexistence and tolerance.

As a member of the UN, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the Council of Europe, Turkey must not burn the bridge of dialogue between Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Many people who have been committed to a dialogue between the different religious communities over the past decades have expressed indignation and anguish regarding the plans of Turkey's government – and the fact that the international community has so far remained silent. Many of them had hoped that these times were over. Thus, the UN should all the more oppose the policy of Turkey's government.

The Islamization policy of the government of Turkey is a threat to the 20 million Alevi in Turkey. Even though many Alevi see themselves as Muslims, they strictly reject the Islamic Sharia law. The Islamization policy in Turkey could also lead to the end of a free Alevi life in the country.

The Human Rights Council and the international community of states must do everything in their power to make Turkey's government call off this decision. The instrumentalization of Islam by the government of Turkey must be condemned.

Therefore, Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to call on Turkey:

- To use the Hagia Sophia as a museum that is open to all visitors.
 - To maintain and preserve the cultural heritage of the peoples and religious communities that live in Turkey or once lived on the territory of today's Turkey.
 - To avoid instrumentalizing religious issues for political means.
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