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Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance, follow-up and implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action

Written statement* submitted by the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe, 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.

[22 August 2014]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Discrimination in minority education: The problem of bilingual minority kindergartens in Greece

The right to education is one of the core principles in international human rights and it should be faithfully implemented by all Member States. 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly states that “Every person has a right to education and to any other fundamental right dependent upon the realization of the right to education”. The principle of equality and non-discrimination in the enjoyment of the right to education is a key for equal access to quality education for persons belonging to minority groups. The lack of equal access to quality education leads to denial of civil and political rights of children belonging to minorities and segregation in society due to the marginalization of minority children.

Under “Section III” of the Lausanne Peace Treaty which defined minority rights enshrined in the Treaty, the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace has an “an equal right to establish manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein”.

When the former UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues, Gay McDougall, visited Greece on 8-16 September 2008¹, she stated that a commonly stated problem is the absence of bilingual kindergartens for the Muslim minority. Four years later, Willy Fautre, who wrote a report following the fact-finding mission that Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF) and Friendship, Equality, Peace Party organized on 16- 20 October 2012 with the participation of President of Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) Hans Heinrich Hansen and former MEP François Alfonsi (France) noted that one of the most important problem stated during consultations with minority representatives and civil society organizations is pre-school minority education for the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace.

In Greece, the compulsory period in education has been extended from nine to ten years in accordance with Law 3518/2006 and the pre-school education for all children at the age of 5 has been made compulsory. The relevant law does not bring any regulation about ethnic and cultural difference of the children in Greece; therefore all children who complete the 5th year of their age are obliged to attend state kindergartens where the language of education is only in Greek.

Since relevant law does not bring any regulation concerning minority schools belonging to Turkish Minority, it contradicts with the principle of educational autonomy enshrined in the Lausanne Treaty. The right not to be discriminated is violated because Greece without an objective and reasonable justification fails to treat differently minority children who speak a different language other than Greek. This violates the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, which Greece signed but not ratified yet.

¹ A/HRC/10/11/Add.3 para. 24, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G09/111/98/PDF/G0911198.pdf?OpenElement>

Furthermore, it is recommended from a pedagogical perspective that it is crucial for children to learn the mother tongue well enough and it facilitates children's learning and a second language easily and fluently. However, Greece does not allow the establishment of bilingual minority kindergartens within minority schooling system. Furthermore, it does not allow minority institution to build and operate private bilingual kindergartens. 211 local representatives of the Turkish minority signed a petition in 2010 for the inclusion of pre-school education into the bilingual education scheme in Western Thrace. Although the petition was submitted to the Greek Ministry of Education, it was not taken into consideration by relevant Greek authorities. Culture and Education Foundation of Western Thrace Minority (CEFOM) had applied to the Greek local authorities for establishment of a private bilingual kindergarten in 2011. The Greek authorities did not respond the establishment of the first private bilingual kindergarten in Western Thrace.

In the beginning of 2012-2013 school year, some children belonging to the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace in Echinós (Şahin) village of Xanthi were not enrolled to the first grade of the primary school on the ground that those children did not attend public kindergarten. During the fact-finding mission in October 2012, the delegation visited Echinós (Şahin) village in Xanthi and met parents of the 20 minority children of whom children were not enrolled to the first grade of the primary school in September 2012 on the ground that those children did not attend public kindergarten. During consultations, the parents stated that they did not want to send their children to public kindergartens where the language of education is only Greek. The mothers told Human Rights Without Frontiers in Echinós, "We were told by the educational authorities to write in one of the documents to be completed that our children had not been able to go to a kindergarten because they had been sick during the whole school-year or because we did not have the financial means to do so, but we refuse to lie." The problem was solved in November 2012, this, however, did not mean a long-lasting solution to the problem of bilingual minority kindergartens.

The former UN Independent Expert on Minority Issues, Gay McDougall, had recommended in her country visit report on Greece² in 2008 that bilingual kindergartens would allow better knowledge of both Turkish and Greek from an early stage therefore providing benefits in terms of integration, and enabling greater choice of whether to go minority of Greek public primary school. On the other hand, Greece claimed that children at kindergartens did not have Greek textbooks, because they did not have any textbooks or any specific curriculum.³ Greece underlined that activities and games were the only means used in kindergartens which served as a smooth introduction to primary education and helped to avoid segregation of the Muslim minority from the rest of the Greek society.⁴

The rapporteur of "Ethnic Turks in Greece, a Muslim Minority", Willy Fautre, noted in his presentation at the Intergroup for Traditional Minorities, National Communities and Languages at the European Parliament in Strasbourg in March 2013 that there is increasing awareness among EU member states that their linguistic diversity must be preserved and that bilingual school education is an asset for all: the individuals, the linguistic minority group, society and the state. Fautre recommended that Greece needs to look at the good practices of other countries, to move forward in the same direction, and more specifically to talk with the Minority and provide its members with the necessary resources so that they can be fluent in the Greek language and go on practising their mother-tongue.

² See <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G09/111/98/PDF/G0911198.pdf?OpenElement>

³ See

http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/minority/oral_statements_forum_minority_2008.htm

⁴ <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G08/164/39/PDF/G0816439.pdf?OpenElement>

The problem is still pending and minority children are still obliged to attend state kindergartens in the following 2014-2015 education year. In June 2014, FUEN, the European Association of Daily Newspapers in Minority and Regional Languages (MIDAS), representatives of the Danish minority in Germany and representatives of the German minority in Denmark in partnership with the Federation of Western Thrace Turks in Europe (ABTTF), Western Thrace Minority University Graduates Association (WTMUGA) and Friendship, Equality, Peace Party (FEP) carried a fact-finding mission to Western Thrace, and the delegation met the parents of the 20 minority children in Echinus. The delegation noted with great concern that minority children are still obliged to attend public kindergartens where the education is only Greek and the demand for bilingual minority kindergartens is still being disregarded by Greek authorities, though eight years time have been elapsed since the adoption of the relevant law.

We urge the Government of Greece to respect its obligations under the Treaty of Lausanne and take measures in order to restore the autonomous structure in the field of education. We expect from the Government of Greece to respect, protect and promote the rights enshrined in the Lausanne Treaty and act in full compliance with the provisions of the Treaty and the core international human rights treaties of which Greece is a party.

We urge Government of Greece to:

- establish bilingual minority kindergartens in region in line with the minority schooling system;
- give bilingual education in public kindergartens in the region until bilingual minority schools are established;
- allow the Turkish Minority of Western Thrace to establish private kindergartens where the language of education will be Turkish and Greek.
