Written Question E-315/02
by Charles Tannock (PPE-DE) to the Commission

(30 October 2002)

Subject: Closure of a Protestant church in Iskenderun, Turkey

Does the Commission have any information on reports that security police in Hatay Province in southern Turkey served notice on the Protestant Christian church in Iskenderun that it should close its doors and cease its activities as of 14 June this year and that the relevant order, signed by the District Security Director, declared that the church had to close because its activities would incite religious and sectarian discrimination and ‘harm religious and national feelings and [will] create offence in [the] society’, despite the fact that the congregation of eighty to ninety Turkish citizens has met in its current location for the past seven years without previous complaint from the Turkish authorities?

Turkey has a long history of protecting Jews and Christians within its territory. If this report is true, does the Commission regard it as significant, and does the Commission have any information on whether or not the closure took place with the knowledge and approval of the Turkish Government in Ankara?

More generally, whatever the merits or demerits of Turkey’s application to join the European Union itself, does the Commission welcome some of the recent political changes in the country and believe that it is in the interests of both Turkey and the European Union to develop closer economic and political ties without prejudice to the final status of the relationship between the two?

Answer given by Mr Verheugen on behalf of the Commission

(19 December 2002)

The Commission is aware of several cases of pressure and harassment against non-Moslem religious communities in Turkey. The Commission is aware of the specific case raised by the Honourable Member.

As a candidate country, Turkey has undertaken to comply with the Copenhagen political criteria. The respect for the principle of freedom of religion is part of these criteria.

The Commission monitors closely the situation in the field of freedom of religion.

In its Regular Report on Turkey published on 9 October 2002 (1), the Commission mentioned that although freedom of religion is guaranteed, in principle, non-Moslem religious communities face legal obstacles. A particular mention was made about the Protestant community which faces significant administrative problems regarding the rental of places of worship and the construction of new churches.

Despite these difficulties, there are signs of increasing de facto recognition of non-Moslem communities. The Turkish State is becoming more involved in the inter-religious dialogue at international level, and is adopting a more inclusive approach to religious education. In October 2001 the Ministry of Interior invited the leaders of the different religious communities to voice their concerns and requests.

In its above mentioned Regular Report, the Commission stressed that Turkey has made noticeable progress towards meeting the Copenhagen political criteria and in particular in the course of the last year. The reforms adopted in August 2002 are particularly far-reaching. Taken together, these reforms provide much of the ground work for strengthening democracy and the protection of human rights in Turkey. They open the way for further changes which should enable Turkish citizens progressively to enjoy rights and freedoms commensurate with those prevailing in the Union.
In its Strategy Paper adopted on 9 October 2002, the Commission recommended that the European Union should enhance its support for Turkey's pre-accession preparation, in view of the next stage of its candidature. As mentioned in the conclusions of the Brussels European Council on 25 October 2002, a decision on the next stage of Turkey's candidature will be taken at the European Council in Copenhagen in December 2002.

The Commission is not aware of any measures taken since the publication of the Regular Report that would affect the problem referred to by the Honourable Member.


WRITTEN QUESTION E-3130/02
by Ilda Figueiredo (GUE/NGL) to the Commission
(4 November 2002)

Subject: WTO negotiations on the General Agreement on Trade in Services

The Commission is at present engaged in negotiations within the World Trade Organisation on a General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), following on from the conclusions of the WTO ministerial meeting in Doha.

In this context, can the Commission answer the following questions:

1. What is the current state of play and what in the Commission's opinion are the prospects for the negotiations, especially as regards the aims to be achieved? What proposals to liberalise services has the Commission submitted to non-member countries, and what proposals have the latter submitted to the Union Member States?

2. Can the Commission give details (preferably classified according to sectors of activity) of the current position regarding the bi- or multilateral service liberalisation agreements already signed or being negotiated with non-member countries?

Answer given by Mr Lamy on behalf of the Commission
(7 January 2003)

1. The Declaration adopted by Ministers at Doha calls as far as services is concerned for the submission of initial requests for specific commitments from other members by 30 June 2002 and for the presentation of initial offers to other Members by 31 March 2003. In accordance with this mandate the Community and its Member States submitted in early July 2002 initial requests to 109 other World Trade Organisation (WTO) Members. In return, the European Union (EU) has up to now received 22 initial requests from third countries (14 from developing countries and emerging economies) seeking further access to the Community services market. Other countries are at this point in time in various stages of preparing their initial requests and further requests are therefore expected to be submitted in the months to come.

The Commission, together with the Member States is still in the process of analysing the incoming requests. The Commission has published a comprehensive consultative document on the incoming requests with a view to seeking public input on how EU might respond to these in its initial offer. In the offer Members will inform trading partners of the improvements they are prepared to make in terms of market access and non-discriminatory treatment.

As far as multilateral talks on services are concerned the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), concluded during the Uruguay Round, and the services negotiations currently being pursued under the Doha Development Agenda cover a whole range of service sectors. As the world’s leading exporter of services, the Union has a strong interest in further opening world markets to trade in services. For further details on the Community's requests the Honourable Member is referred to the Commission's answer to Written Question P-2621/02 by Mr Turco (1) and to the summary of the requests published on the Directorate General (DG) Trade's website (http://europa.eu.int/comtrade).