

## **Cyprus Weekly, 8 January 2008 Interview**

Church taking Turkey to European Rights Court

*By Philippos Stylianou*

THE Church of Cyprus is going ahead with a decision to take Turkey to the European Court of Human Rights over its continuing refusal to allow access to the Christian Orthodox places of worship in the occupied areas belonging to it.

The application when launched, will be the most massive faced by Turkey since invading the island in 1974, as more than 500 churches and monasteries have been looted, desecrated, destroyed and alienated from their refugee congregations.

"We are in the process of setting up a team of legal and other experts and we are meeting next week to lay the groundwork for the action at Strasbourg," Archbishop Chrysostomos told The Cyprus Weekly in an exclusive interview yesterday and added:

"It will be a dual claim both for being prevented by the occupation army to repair and restore our churches and for being deprived of our right to practise our religion in those churches."

He, nevertheless, said that the application could be withdrawn if Turkey changed its policy and allowed access to the occupied Orthodox places of worship.

The European Convention on Human Rights and its Protocols, implemented by the Strasbourg – based European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), protects amongst other the right to religious freedom and the peaceful enjoyment of one's possessions, while outlawing overall discrimination on religious grounds for the parties to the Convention.

Violation

The ECHR has repeatedly found Turkey in violation of property rights of Cypriot refugees and made to pay on one occasion alone compensation close to £800,000.

"We have realised that the Turks want to uproot everything that is Greek, everything that is Christian in the occupied areas. Well, we shall not accept this.

"The Church of Cyprus cannot accept the prevailing situation of not being able to restore and maintain its churches in the occupied part and celebrate mass there. These are our churches from which we have been forcibly expelled, as the inhabitants have been expelled from their homes and properties," the Archbishop said.

He noted that in the Karpass, where there are few Christians left, there is only one priest for all the villages and parishes as far as Apostolos Andreas, yet the occupation authorities would not allow the Church to send more priests.

He stressed that the Church would not only claim the abandoned churches back but also those, which have been converted into mosques. "If they want more mosques, let them build their own," the Head of the Cyprus Church said.

Asked what prompted the decision to apply to the ECHR, Archbishop Chrysostomos said that the Cyprus Church was disappointed at a rapprochement attempt with Turkish Cypriot religious

leader Ahmed Yonluer on the initiative of visiting President of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Rene van der Linden in February last year.

### Delaying

"When I raised the question of restoring the churches in the occupied areas," he said: "Yonluer proposed that we restore one church there and one mosque in the free part of the island at a time.

"I pointed out that all mosques in the government-controlled areas had been fully restored and invited Yonluer to name me one that had not, so that we may repair it immediately on our expense.

He still insisted on one church to one mosque and I then said that even if the mosques had not been repaired, it would take half a millennium to restore all the churches, since there were more than 500 of them in the occupied areas, while there weren't enough mosques to go round. It was obvious they were simply following delaying tactics and had no intention of restoring the occupied churches."

The saddest thing, the Archbishop remarked, was that Rene van der Linden, present at the meeting, did not intervene once to ask if the mosques had really been restored and what the Turkish Cypriot religious leader had to say about that.

On the other hand, the Cypriot Primate noted that in his various contacts in Europe since taking office he was encouraged to take compelling action against Turkey for the restoration of the occupied churches.

In response to another question if the recourse to Strasbourg meant that the Cyprus Church would abandon efforts to come to an understanding on the issue, Chrysostomos said:

"If they show that they have the good will – which I believe they don't – we are open to a serious and positive commitment. But the application to Strasbourg will continue unless they let us go and repair our churches. If that happens, we might withdraw the application."

### Coinciding

The launch of the complaint against Turkey is scheduled to coincide with the establishment of an official delegation of the Church of Cyprus in Brussels, the Archbishop said. The delegation is expected to assist the attorneys who will present the case of the Church at the ECHR.

The Church Delegation will be housed in the former four-storey building of the Permanent Delegation of Cyprus to the EU, which it has bought. According to Archbishop Chrysostomos, the final contract will be signed soon.

Regarding the staffing of the Delegation, he said that it would be headed by Suffragan Bishop Porfyrios, an academically qualified member of the Church, assisted by another cleric and four laymen.

Following next week's meeting with the legal team, Archbishop Chrysostomos will make an official announcement and give out the names of the lawyers who will represent the Church at Strasbourg.