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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000256

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TAGS SOCI, PHUM, TU, VT

SUBJECT: TURKEY: VATICAN BACKS INTEGRATION

REF: A. A: VATICAN 249

¶B. B: ANKARA 6593, ET AL.

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CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Pol/Econ Chief, Vatican, State. REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) While not officially endorsing Turkey's entry into the EU (ref a), the Holy See continues to support the dialogue and reform process connected to the issue. Top officials, including the pope, have spoken positively in public and private about European integration. Although they are critical of the religious freedom situation in Turkey, officials recognize that the EU entry process offers an opportunity to bring Turkey along on these matters. In his December 6 audience, the pope expressed emphasized his hope that Turkey would be a "bridge of friendship and of fraternal cooperation between the East and West." Post continues to engage on the issue, focusing on the opportunity presented by integration and EU entry to ameliorate the situation for Catholics and other Christians in Turkey. A high-level visit from the Department could be very helpful in highlighting the matter for the Holy See and eliciting further useful public and private comments. Please see paragraphs 5-6 for action request.

"Positive" Process

¶2. (C) Holy See Undersecretary for Relations with States (Deputy FM equivalent) Pietro Parolin told the Charge December 6 that the Holy See continues to support the "positive" process of dialogue and reform connected to Turkey's EU bid . (Recent public statements from other Holy See officials have borne a similar positive message on European integration.) The Vatican's position on Turkey's EU accession has not changed (ref a), despite inaccurate media reports following Pope Benedict's meeting with PM Erdogan . In fact, neither the pope nor the Vatican have endorsed Turkey's EU membership per se; rather, the Holy See has been consistently open to accession, emphasizing only that Turkey needs to fulfill the EU's Copenhagen criteria to take its place in Europe. If that occurs, Parolin reiterated, "we would see no obstacle" to Turkey's joining the EU -- a development which, he agreed, has the potential to promote greater rights for religious minorities in Turkey.

Caveats

¶3. (C) Parolin does have some concerns about the situation. One great fear is that Turkey could enter the EU without having made the necessary advances in religious freedom. He insisted that EU members - and the U.S. - continue to press the GoT on these issues. We noted that the continuing dialogue and process for EU entry provide just such a forum for this pressure, and cautioned that deadlines and ultimatums would be counterproductive -- robbing Turkey of a powerful incentive to enact needed reforms, and depriving the West of valuable leverage on the issue. Parolin took the point, but said that short of "open persecution", it couldn't get much worse for the Christian community in Turkey, where limited property rights and other factors have left Christians enjoying "freedom of belief, but hardly a full freedom of religion". Other Vatican officials expressed disappointment to us over President Sezer's veto of nine articles of the recently passed Foundations Law affecting religious minorities (ref b). Parolin noted that a list of particular problems -- outlined in a document put out by the Turkish Catholic bishops two years ago -- remains valid today as an explanation of the troubles Catholics face in Turkey.

Pope Speaks Again

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¶4. (C) Parolin confirmed that the pope's trip to Turkey had been very positive for inter-religious relations. The "tense atmosphere" in Turkey preceding the visit may have eased somewhat. With regard to Erdogan's incorrect assertion that the pope had expressed his specific support for Turkey's EU membership, Parolin expressed certainty that the PM hadn't misunderstood the pontiff; but probably just wanted to get some good media coverage from the meeting. The pope expressed the "same position we have always had", though perhaps in a "nicer way". The general message from the Holy See on the issue, in any case, has been positive. At his weekly audience December 6, the pope expressed his hope for "joint Christian and Muslim action on behalf of human rights" and emphasized his hope that Turkey would be a "bridge of friendship and of fraternal cooperation between the East and West."

Comment and Action Request

¶5. (C) The Holy See will not officially endorse Turkey's EU entry, but positive comments from the pope and other officials in support of the dialogue and reforms that are part of integration and the entry process receive a lot of play in the European media. The pope's Regensburg speech , which made clear that he is not naive about the challenges presented by Islam, gives added heft to his favorable words on Turkey. Private comments from Vatican officials to European diplomats here also carry some weight - particularly in the traditionally Catholic countries. Our emphasis on using integration and EU entry as an opportunity to make life better for Christians in Turkey, will resonate with the Vatican, and could lead to more Holy See action, both public and private. Despite Parolin's insistence that those in favor of Turkey's EU entry must do more to push for reforms, he is on the same page with us on the overarching issue: in essence, both Turkey and Europe need to see diversity as a strength, not a threat.

¶6. (C) At this critical juncture we have an opportunity to catalyze a more active Holy See voice on Turkey. We hope a senior Department official such as A/S Fried or DAS Bryza can visit in the near future to highlight the matter for the Holy See and encourage them to do more to push a positive message on Turkey and integration. SANDROLINI