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TURKEY | Court Denies Pastor Release Request

A Turkish court denied a request for an American pastor facing terrorism-related charges to be released pending the outcome of his trial. Pastor Andrew Brunson, who has been detained since Oct. 7, 2016, is accused of having links to the Gulen movement, the organization deemed to be responsible for the attempted military coup in July 2016, and to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The case against the pastor is reportedly based on digital evidence and witness testimony, including three secret ones. If found guilty, he faces up to 35 years in prison.

A seeming rapport between Presidents Trump and Erdogan during the recent North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit raised moderate hopes that the pastor might be released. However, on July 18, the court in Aliaga rejected Pastor Brunson's lawyer's request for him to be released after the final prosecution witnesses were heard and pending the outcome of the trial. The court also set the subsequent hearing for Oct. 12.

The court's decision has been condemned by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). In a statement issued July 18, USCIRF Vice Chair Kristina Arriaga said she had hoped the judge would "put an end to the miscarriage of justice that Pastor Brunson's entire case represents" and called on the Trump Administration and U.S. Congress to "continue to apply pressure, including using targeted sanctions against officials connected to this case, until Pastor Brunson is released."

On Sept. 28, President Erdogan expressed his willingness to negotiate the release of Pastor Brunson with the American government in return for the extradition of the Turkish Muslim Scholar Fetullah Gulen, whom he accuses of organizing the failed coup in July 2016. However, Gulen has consistently denied any link and expressed his willingness to stand trial outside Turkey.

Pastor Brunson's case is illustrative of the significant deterioration in the human rights situation in the aftermath of the attempted coup. Thousands of journalist, academics, activists, writers, teachers, judges and thinkers have been arrested since the failed coup and accused of being "traitors and collaborators against national interests." There are fears of a further deterioration as President Erdogan's consolidates power even more following his recent electoral victory.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "Pastor Brunson led a church in Izmir for over 23 years with the full knowledge of the authorities. Consequently, his detention and trial on terrorism-related charges is both excessive and perplexing. Moreover, the fact he is being

prosecuted on the basis of testimony supplied in part by secret witnesses undermines due process. This travesty has continued for too long. We urge the Turkish authorities to release Pastor Brunson and to allow him to return home to his family.”