



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing

Turkey Post-Referendum: Institutions and Human Rights

**Tuesday, May 2, 2017
10:30 – 11:30 AM
2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, and the Helsinki Commission's joint briefing on Turkey's post-referendum institutional changes, and their effect on human rights.

I would like to thank our panelists for coming here today to share their expertise with us.

Since the failed coup attempt in July 2016, Turkey has increasingly restricted the rights of its citizens under the guise of security.

The government has fired as many as 130,000 public workers including police officers, soldiers, academics and teachers. Human rights groups have documented widespread reports of ill-treatment and torture in police custody.

Over past weeks my staff has been meeting with Turkish human rights defenders who are returning to Turkey to stand trial on charges of terrorism and treason.

These people are reporters, professors and physicians who have a history of defending democracy and basic human rights.

American Christian Pastor Andrew Brunson is one example of many thousands who have been falsely charged with terrorism.

Pastor Brunson has been a pastor in Turkey for 23 years. In October 2016 he was arrested on immigration violation charges.

He initially was denied access to a Turkish attorney and was placed in solitary confinement for part of that time. His official charge papers still state that no evidence has been gathered against him.

Pastor Brunson has dedicated his life to serving the Turkish people, has raised his family there, and has never been a member of a terrorist organization.

Pastor Brunson remains in prison today, and we call for his immediate release.

2 weeks ago Turkey held a referendum that continues to transform the country's institutions in major ways.

The executive powers of the president were expanded enabling him to appoint ministers without parliamentary approval, to exert greater influence over the judiciary branch, and to call for early elections.

The purpose of this briefing is to understand how these institutional changes will affect human rights in the country on top of the abuses perpetrated under the state sanctioned emergency measures.

I look forward to hearing from our panel on how United States policy can best serve those in Turkey suffering under human rights abuses. Thank you.