

Turkish court frees American minister Andrew Brunson

October 13, 2018

IZMIR, Turkey (RNS)—A Turkish court freed Andrew Brunson, an American missionary who had been the subject of a diplomatic standoff between the United States and Turkey.

Brunson had been under house arrest after being accused of terrorism and conspiring against the Turkish government. The pastor, who denies all charges against him, previously had been imprisoned.

The court handed down a 37-month sentence Oct. 12 but suspended that sentence, saying Brunson already had served nearly two years. A ban on Brunson traveling out of Turkey and an order for house detention also were lifted, meaning the pastor is free.

‘I love Jesus. I love Turkey’

Brunson’s lawyer told the court there was no evidence against his client, at which point the judge asked Brunson to speak.

“I am an innocent human being,” Brunson told the court near the city of Izmir, where he led a church he established and tended to for nearly a decade. “I love Jesus. I love Turkey.”

Much of the case against the pastor, who has lived in Turkey since 1993, was based on the testimony of secret witnesses and corroborated by a handful of former members of Brunson’s own congregation.

Those key testimonies were thrown into doubt after the Oct. 12 hearing. The hearing began two hours later than scheduled, at 11:30 a.m. local time,

and lasted more than five hours.

Brunson was brought early in the morning from his home in Izmir, where he had been under house arrest since July. The day before the hearing, Jeffrey Hovenier, the chargé d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Ankara, visited his home, staying about 45 minutes. The United States has not appointed an ambassador to Turkey, making Hovenier the highest ranking diplomat in the country.

Two witnesses recanted testimony

The hearing saw two key witnesses recanting much of their testimony against Brunson, which called into question the testimony provided by Levent Kalkan, a former member of Brunson's church who was relied heavily upon by the prosecution.

Kalkan had told the court he learned from another source that Brunson had been meeting members of the Fethullah Gulen movement, which the Turkish government blames for a failed coup in 2016. But at the hearing, Yilmaz Demircan, the alleged source of this information, denied ever saying so.

Kalkan, for his part, acknowledged that information was not correct. He had also named several members in Brunson's church who he said were part of the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, but that information as well appears to have been fabricated.

In previous testimony, Kalkan had told the court the church had two types of people—those “who loved their country” and others “sympathetic to terrorism and who had separatist views.” He had accused Brunson of using aid work to Syrian refugees as a cover to find and aid ethnic Kurds who were members of the PKK, a group designated as a terror organization by Turkey and the U.S.

Kalkan alleged eight members of the church had PKK backgrounds. He told prosecutors Brunson met with those PKK members in secret meetings at the church and a house nearby.

But at the hearing, a witness told the court Kalkan was the source of those accusations.

Volkan Surer, who Kalkan had claimed told him at least one church member was “trained in bomb-making by the PKK,” told the court in fact that he had never said this.

Instead, Surer told the court, Kalkan had told him this.

“The funny thing is that I actually heard this from Levent,” Surer told the court. “I met Levent at the Goztepe sports club, and on his insistence I went to the church. Levent told me, ‘These are all terrorists—they won’t look you in the eye.’”

Surer said the allegations by Kalkan that those members were part of the PKK were entirely fabricated.

“We are patriotic people, no matter what our faith is,” he said.

Kalkan, in response, told the court only that he “was shocked” by what Surer had said.

‘Prayers of thousands were answered’

Brunson and his supporters had maintained Kalkan and other witnesses were resenting the fact they had been expelled from the congregation and were fabricating allegations against him.

In a statement released by the American Center for Law and Justice, which represents Brunson, Brunson thanked those who had prayed for his

release. He also thanked President Trump and his attorneys.

"This is the day our family has been praying for—I am delighted to be on my way home to the United States," Brunson said in the statement. "It's been an extremely difficult time for our family, and we want to express our appreciation to the millions of people around the world who have faithfully prayed for this day."

Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council and a member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, visited with Brunson and his wife, Norine Brunson, the day before the trial. He passed along letters from Trump and Vice President Mike Pence, along with a pledge signed by more than 16,000 American Christians promising to pray for them.

"The prayers of thousands were answered today when Pastor Brunson was released by the Turkish government and told he could go home to the United States," Perkins said.

A number of Trump's evangelical supporters also released statements crediting prayer and the administration with Brunson's release, including Jack Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano; Ronnie Floyd, pastor of Cross Church in Northwest Arkansas and president of the National Day of Prayer Task Force; Franklin Graham, head of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Samaritan's Purse; and Johnnie Moore, a public relations consultant and member of U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Russell Moore, head of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, also tweeted out his thanks, saying: "The release of pastor Andrew Brunson is an answer to the prayers of millions of Christians around the world. We pray that this crisis will remind us to continue to pray for those imprisoned by oppressive regimes around the

world because of their religious faith."

Emily Miller contributed to this report.