

## **Turkish gov't steps up pressure, threats to reconvert Hagia Sophia into mosque**



**Only days remain before Turkey's highest administrative court rules on a petition demanding that the iconic Hagia Sophia be used for Muslim prayers and worship.**

**The greatest of all cathedrals in eastern Christendom has operated as Turkey's most visited museum since the 1930s, and is today registered as a prominent UNESCO World Heritage Site.**

**Following a bevy of inflammatory statements by top Erdogan government ministers and officials, who demand that the Hagia Sophia be reconverted into a mosque, several Islamist NGOs have begun a campaign throughout the predominately Muslim country to pressure in this direction.**

In a continuing a media crescendo over the matter, the pro-Erdogan daily Yeni Safak on Monday featured a front-page article that claimed that whatever decision by the high court is not binding for the government – in other words the increasingly Islamist and authoritarian government can proceed with a conversion no matter what the judiciary says.

In yet another high-profile statement, Turkish Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul

appeared confident that “one way or another”, as he said, the Hagia Sophia will soon operate as a mosque.

The prospect of a change in the status of the Hagia Sophia has generated heightened criticism and reactions abroad, and not only from the Orthodox world, which is following the matter with the utmost of concern.

UNESCO’s leadership has already warned Ankara that there can be no change in the monument’s status without prior approval by the UN organization.

In a related development, press reports out of Turkey referred to surveillance by Turkish authorities of Greek pilgrims that previously visited the historic Panaghia Soumela monastery near the city of Trabzon, in northeast Asia Minor, a part of the legendary Pontus region.

The media reports are based on testimony by a former member of Turkey’s intelligence service, whose testimony came in June 2016 before an appellate criminal court in that country.