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## SMITH BILL SEEKING RESPECT FOR RELIGIOUS RIGHTS OF THOSE IN TURKEY ADVANCES

TRENTON - A Senate joint resolution sponsored by Senator Bob Smith, to urge the government of Turkey to stop racial and religious discrimination by recognizing the religious authority of the Eastern Orthodox Church, was approved by the Assembly State Government Committee today.

Senator Smith noted that the Ecumenical Patriarchate is the spiritual leader for approximately 250 million Orthodox Christians worldwide, and is considered the highest authority of the Church.

The resolution, SJR-11, would call on the government of Turkey to uphold and protect both religious and human rights of everyone without compromise.

"As Americans we take freedom very seriously, and that is why we are urging the leaders in Turkey to stop persecuting non-Muslims," said Senator Smith, D- Middlesex & Somerset.

"The United States has been raising its concerns about the treatment of the Ecumenical Patriarchate by the Turkish government," said Senator Smith. "For years, our government has been requesting the leaders in Turkey to reopen the Halki Seminary, which served as the main school of theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church. This important school has been closed for 35 years because of a Turkish law that forbids private universities from functioning.

"This fall, Turkey will begin negotiations to join the European Union," said Senator Smith. "I hope that the European Union will use its power to convince Turkey to respect the rights of the Orthodox Christians as a condition of Turkey's membership into the Union."

According to Senator Smith, the European Union is currently made up of twenty-five independent countries that work together to enhance their political, economic and social needs.

The bill now heads to the full Assembly for consideration.

The 25 countries that make up the European Union consist of: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, The

Greek part of Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.