Address by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, at the 2nd International Conference on Christian Persecution held in Budapest

On 28th November 2019, with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, attended the 2nd Conference in Defence of Christians in Budapest and delivered the following address.

I extend my heartfelt greetings to all the participants in the 2nd Conference in Defence of Christians. It is a very good thing that this forum, initiated by the Hungarian government, has seen continuation. It means that in the world community there are the forces concerned for the fate of Christians who are subjected to persecution and have to endure the consequences thereof.

On behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church I would like to express my gratitude to Hungary for its numerous efforts undertaken for the defence and support of Christians in the Middle East and for its help in restoring churches in Iraq. We value highly the meeting of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban with the heads of the Christian Churches of the Middle East which took place on 30th October 2019. It is very important that Christian communities which suffered persecution should feel support from fraternal Christian peoples.

The Christian population has every reason to consider itself a fundamental part of the ethno-religious map of the Middle East. In spite of the sharp reduction in the numbers of Christians in Iraq, Syria and other countries of the region, many of those who believe in Christ intend to stay till the last in the land of their forefathers. Almost two thousand years ago they raised up communities, built churches and monasteries and laid the foundations for Christian dogma. We have never heard from the leaders of the Middle Eastern Christian Churches any call to leave homeland. On the contrary, they say unanimously that Christians ought to remain in their homeland, where they are the indigenous population. That is why among those who have left, many want to return. It is essential that we support them in their aspirations and enable the process of the return of refugees. The restoration of churches and infrastructure, security guarantees and development of international relations all play a key role in the cause of the return of

Christians to the Middle East and preservation of the Christian presence.

When speaking of the persecution of Christians, Africa is often neglected. And yet it is in this region that the persecution of Christians has taken on a truly terrifying scale.

The extremist threat in Egypt is still high, in spite of the fact that the Egyptian government together with religious leaders makes a great deal of effort to ensure the interreligious and interethnic accord in society and realizes interfaith projects aimed at strengthening mutual trust and understanding.

But it is in the countries to the south of Sahara that we see the most serious problems, primarily in Nigeria and the neighbouring states. Powerful terrorist groupings have been formed there, which pursue an ideology of radicalism and intolerance towards Christians. News on the murder of priests and pastors and the mass killings of laypersons comes through with sad regularity. As a result of the inaction of the government, army and police, Boko Haram, as well as the Fulbe tribal groups are conducting a true genocide against Christians. They murder and kidnap people, including women and children, with the aim of holding them for ransom. They burn down whole Christian villages. And no one has the power to defend Christians because the terrorists are vicious, numerous and well-armed. The world community now needs to hear the voices of Christian countries and clergy in defence of the African Christians who are being exterminated before our very eyes.

I should also mention the plight of Christians in some regions of Asia. This concerns primarily the region of India and Pakistan. In spite of the large number of Christians there, the level of extremism is still extremely high. There is a constant flow of information about attacks on Christians in Pakistan, as well as domestic discrimination. In India nationalist Hindu groupings regularly attack Christian communities.

For a number of years the Russian Orthodox Church has been carrying out humanitarian work in the Middle East. In March 2017, with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, there was established the Interreligious Working Group for Aid to the Syrian Population under the Russian Presidential Council for Cooperation with Religious Associations made up of both Russian Christians and Muslims. Over a short period, the Interreligious Working Group has undertaken a number of humanitarian endeavours. In June and August 2017 two air cargoes of humanitarian aid were dispatched to Syria. In 2018 more than seventy-seven tons of high-quality products were sent to Syria and Lebanon and distributed among Syrian families standing in acute need. The aid was distributed in churches and mosques jointly by Christians and Muslims of Russia and Syria.

In November 2018, at the head of an interreligious delegation from Russia, I visited Damascus, where I participated in a meeting of leaders and high representatives of Syria’s traditional religious communities. Within the framework of the visit, aid was also handed delivered to a boarding school in Damascus for

the children of the fallen Syrian military.

Last March the Interreligious Group carried out a new project, within the framework of which a thousand of boxes containing food products (about fifteen tons) were delivered to Damascus and distributed through religious communities among the needy Syrian families. It was then that a yet another project was drawn up with the view of restoring the destroyed Syrian social infrastructure, without which it would be impossible for the Syrians to return to normal life. The first site to be chosen was a school for 1200 pupils in the Barzeh district of Damascus that had suffered from military action. The total area of the school is 6000 square meters. The Interreligious Working Group organized a fundraising campaign and the school was restored within a few months, by the beginning of this school year. On 23rd September 2019 the school was reopened and the event was attended by the religious leaders of Syria and delegates from Russia. At present some further steps are being discussed to improve the lives of our brothers and sisters in the Middle East.

In addition, a medical treatment programme for the Syrian children affected by the hostilities is being implemented in Russia. We select the most pressing cases of young patients, making for them artificial limbs and offering aftercare treatment and adaptation courses, including psychological ones. In this work as well we make no distinction – children are coming to Russia from both Christian and Muslim families.

It is not fortuitous that I have emphasized the interfaith element in our aid to the Middle East. For many centuries this region has been a place where different religions, cultures and traditions have taken root. It is a home for the main shrines of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Middle Eastern Christians cherish their relationships with representatives of other religions. They are faced with having to build up their future together and preserve traditions of common life of peace and creative efforts. We are well aware of this and therefore devote much attention to the interreligious aspect.

In Russia too we have over the centuries built up relationships with representatives of other religions and accumulated quite a considerable positive experience. On various occasions we have heard from our foreign partners words of admiration for the culture of interfaith relations in Russia. They have spoken publicly about this.**[1] [2]** We believe that without due attention to the issues of interreligious relations it is impossible to vouchsafe a normal future for Christians. Moreover, the development of relations with other religions is a means of restraining extremism.

For Russia the Middle East is not an alien region; we take to our hearts the joys and afflictions of the peoples of the Middle East. And today our soldiers are once again helping much-suffering Syria destroy international terrorism, protect civilians and initiate the process of restoring a normal life whereby equal rights of all the religious communities are guaranteed.

In recent years we have frequently heard voices raised by the concerned countries in defence of Christians. In 2010 and 2011 two resolutions were published by the European Parliament relating to attacks on Christians in Iraq**[3]** and Egypt.**[4]** In 2011 in Rome the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe held a conference in defence of Christians.**[5]** In March 2015, during a session of the UN Human Rights Council, sixty-five countries adopted the first resolution of its kind on supporting the Middle Eastern Christians. Its initiators were Russia, the Vatican, Lebanon and Armenia.**[6]** In May of the same year the OSCE conference took place in Vienna on Enhancing Efforts to Prevent and Combat Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians. In October 2015 Greece held in Athens a high-level forum on Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East. In October 2017 a second forum on the same topic took place there.**[7]** In the same month in Budapest there was organized the first conference on the persecution of Christians.**[8]** At the end of 2017 the OSCE held conferences in Yerevan**[9]** and Vienna**[10]** on the topic of the defence of Christians. Attending the aforementioned forum in Vienna, organized on the initiative of the Russian and Hungarian Foreign Ministries, were many of those present here today. And now we have gathered for a second time in Hungary to discuss measures of rendering humanitarian support to the Christians in the Middle East.

I have listed all these initiatives in order to show the steadfast resolve of many European countries to come to the defence of persecuted Christians. I am convinced that if all of these countries were to unite their efforts, it would be possible to achieve a greater result. For our part we are willing to take an active part in this cause.

Throughout the twentieth century the Russian Orthodox Church was subjected to the most ferocious of trials. The persecution of our Church lasted for decades and all those who were true to Christ lived in constant fear for their lives. Bishops and priests were killed in thousands, along with hundreds of thousands of laypeople. A huge number of churches and monasteries were destroyed. Yet, in spite of all this, after the collapse of the theomachist regime, the Russian Orthodox Church has been regaining strength at an impressive rate. And today we open several churches a day, hold a meaningful dialogue with the state and society and develop international contacts. The example of the new martyrs and confessors of the Russian Church inspires us and gives us strength to carry out our ministry. As we recall their heroic deeds and see the faith of modern-day Christian martyrs we become ever and again convinced that Christ's cause lives as there are people willing to give their lives for him. For Christ said: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mk 8:35).

To conclude my address, I would like to express the hope that today's forum will help Christians of both East and West unite their efforts in the cause of peacemaking. I hope that with the support of Christian

countries we will bear the witness to the Truth before the world by fulfilling Christ's commandment of love: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35).

[1] The Secretary General of the Muslim World League values highly Russia's experience in interfaith relations. URL: **https://islam-today.ru/novosti/2019/04/04/gensek-vsemirnoj-islamskoj-ligi-vysoko-ocenil-opyt-rossii-v-mezreligioznyh-otnoseniah/**

[2] Meeting with the President of the World Jewish Congress, Ronald S. Lauder. URL: **http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51751**

[3] European Parliament resolution of 25 November 2010 on Iraq: the death penalty (notably the case of Tariq Aziz) and attacks against Christian communities. URL: **http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P7-TA-2010-0448&language=EN**

[4] European Parliament resolution of 20 January 2011 on the situation of Christians in the context of freedom of religion. URL: **http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2011-0021+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN**

[5] Summary report of the OSCE high-level meeting on preventing and responding to hate incidents and crimes against Christians. Rome, 2011. p.31.

[6] Joint statement by 65 States pronounced at the initiative of the Russian Federation, Holy See and Lebanon in the course of the 28th UNHRC session, Geneva, 13 March 2015. URL: **http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/1092273**

[7] DECR chairman speaks at Athens forum on religious pluralism in Middle East. URL: **https://mospat.ru/en/2017/10/30/news152078/**

[8] Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk speaks at international conference on persecution of Christians. URL: **https://mospat.ru/en/2017/10/12/news151284/**

[9] Foreign Minister of Armenia participated in the conference on "Preventing and Countering Hate Crimes against Christians and Members of other Religious Groups – Perspectives from the OSCE and beyond". URL: **https://www.mfa.am/en/press-releases/2017/11/22/fm-odihr-conf/7706**

[10] Russian Federation calls upon OSCE to effectively defend the rights of Christians in the Middle East. URL: **https://tass.ru/politika/4794176**

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/45872/