DECR chairman's presentation at conference dedicated to the second anniversary of Havana meeting

On 12 February 2018, the second anniversary of the ***meeting in Havana between Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and Pope Francis****, an* ***international conference on the plight of Christians in the Middle East*** *took place in Vienna, Austria. Among the keynote speakers was Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations. The text of his presentation is given below.*

Dear Conference participants and guests!

Today's conference is dedicated to the second anniversary of the historic meeting between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia. In my presentation I would like to highlight the main reason which prompted the two First Hierarchs into arranging this meeting in Havana in February 2016. The reason is the mass persecution of Christians. The most dramatic situation in which our brothers and sisters in the Middle East, North Africa and a number of other regions have found themselves has become a challenge for world Christianity. This challenge cannot remain unanswered.

Today most of the terrorists in Syria and Iraq have been defeated. However, it is too early to say that Christians in these countries are in complete safety. Recently serious damage was done by shelling to Christian churches in Damascus. It was only by a miracle that the Maronite bishop Sammir Nassar did not die. In the Afrin District of Syria Christians have been crying out for help as they find themselves under fire and are afraid of a new invasion of extremists.

Hotbeds of persecution are flaring up in other regions of the world as well. The killing of Copts and blowing up of churches in Egypt continues. In Nigeria Muslim tribesmen have killed more than two hundred Christians over the past year. Dozens of Christians have become their victims in this year alone. The escalation of violence against Christians in India has again flared up. Asia Bibi, a Catholic over whom the threat of the death penalty hangs, has already spent more than eight years incarcerated in a Pakistani prison.

Today martyrs are once more "at the cost of their own lives are giving witness to the truth of the Gospel, preferring death to the denial of Christ. United by their shared suffering, they are a pledge of the unity of Christians" (Joint Declaration, par.12). Persecution has become the common challenge to Christians of various confessions. The terrorists, who are trying to wipe out Christianity in the Middle East, do not make any distinction as to who is before them: Orthodox, Catholics, Armenians or Assyrians.

Militants have kidnapped clergymen and laity of various confessions in Syria and Iraq. Quite often within a single group of captives there have been, for example, Catholics and Syriac Orthodox, as happened in al-Qaryatayn. I remind you all that the metropolitans of Aleppo Paul (Yazigi) and Gregory John (Ibrahim), kidnapped in April of 2013, belong to the Orthodox Church of Antioch and the Syriac Orthodox Church respectively. Knowing nothing of their fate after abduction, we continue to pray for them and hope for the miracle of their return to their flock.

The Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches share a common position on many issues, including that of the situation of Christians in the Middle East. The Pope and the Patriarch in the Joint Declaration emphasized the need to unite the efforts of the Orthodox and the Catholics wherever it is possible and necessary. “Our Christian conscience and our pastoral responsibility compel us not to remain passive in the face of challenges requiring a shared response,” the Declaration states (par. 7).

The results of the past two years demonstrate that a common Christian response to the challenges of modern-day civilization has been effective. After the meeting in Havana bilateral cooperation has become much more intensive.

I shall quote the words of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill about the Havana meeting with Pope Francis uttered at the meeting with the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby on 21 of November 2017: “I give thanks to God that at this meeting the situation was defined as the genocide of the Christian minority. This word had been avoided by the political establishment, but then it began to be used widely, including at the level of the US Congress. I believe that it was an important contribution of the bilateral meeting with regard to the change in attitude on behalf of the international community on the topic of the Christian minorities.”

The meeting in Havana truly became a “sign for all people of goodwill” (Joint Declaration, par. 6). We can testify that this event evoked wide public response all over the world. It is thanks to the meeting that the problem of the persecution of Christians in the Middle East had unprecedented extensive coverage in the media and gained attention of many people. Serious talks about persecution began at the highest level. Of no less importance, too, is that religious leaders throughout the world – Christian, Muslim, Jewish – expressed their support for the meeting between the Pope and the Patriarch.

For Syrian Christians the consolidated position of the Orthodox and Catholics became a sign of hope. They have seen that the appeal to their salvation was made at the very highest level and echoed all over the world – from political and religious leaders to common people.

Our humanitarian cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church is being actively developed, the impulse

for which was given by the Havana meeting. The main tasks have been outlined which must be resolved in order to attain the main goal of preserving the Christian presence in the region. Among them are the restoration of churches and monasteries which have traditionally been centers of consolidation for the Christian communities.

Along with this, it is important to create the conditions for regular worship and normal parish life; otherwise Christians will continue to flee from the region. We know of many examples of Christians abandoning their homelands forever because militants had destroyed their churches.

Among the tasks outlined is the guarantee of work to the population, especially the youth, as well as the restoration of the infrastructure: schools, hospitals and pharmacies. In this the people of Syria are expecting the wide-scale assistance of the world community.

The situation linked to the destruction of Christian holy sites in Syria has been studied within the framework of implementing the plans outlined in Havana. The result of this assiduous work has been an illustrated catalogue, the first part of which has just been published. The catalogue contains thirty churches, monasteries and Christian cemeteries which have to be restored in the near future.

I would like to emphasize that the issue of restoring normal life in Syria is today for the Moscow Patriarchate a priority in interconfessional cooperation.

This is a catalogue, which was prepared jointly by the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity and the “Kirche in Not” international foundation, which invests a lot of efforts into helping Christians in Syria, Iraque and other countries of the Middle East.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, when meeting with a delegation of bishops of the Syrian Churches in 2013, said to them: “We perceive the sufferings of the Syrian people as our own sufferings. In our country churches were also destroyed, the blood of tens of thousands of Christians was also shed and also in the name of ‘freedom, equality and brotherhood’ – we endured all of this.”

During the years of persecution the Russian Church felt the solidarity shown by Christians of the whole world, and today we are aiming by all available means to support and protect our persecuted brothers and sisters in the Middle East and in other regions.

The Moscow Patriarchate, from the very first days when the situation in the Middle East became grave, has raised its voice in defense of the Christian communities.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill visited Syria, where the conflict had already begun to flare up, and Lebanon, in order to support our brothers in Christ from the Orthodox Church of Antioch.

At all possible levels the Moscow Patriarchate actively defends the interests of Christians in the Middle East. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill and other high representatives of our Church have consistently spoken out in support of persecuted Christians at such platforms as the United Nations, as well as at many other international platforms.

Representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate have repeatedly touched upon the problem of the situation of Christians in the Middle East at sessions of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill sent letters to the heads of states who are able to influence directly or indirectly the situation regarding persecuted Christians.

In the cause of protecting Christians from persecution we are in close contact with the Russian state. The Russian president Vladimir Putin pays special attention to the disastrous situation of Christians in the Middle East, as is confirmed by his recent meetings with the Primate of the Orthodox Church of Antioch John X and Patriarch Tawadros II, Patriarch of the Coptic Church.

The heads of the Christian Churches of the Middle East have often visited the Russian Orthodox Church in recent years. In conversations with Church leaders we receive true information on the situation, which allows us to convey their interests to the international community.

The Moscow Patriarchate works with public organizations which have shown an interest in the fate of Christians of the Middle East. We support their initiatives and help them to realize them.

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill in his speeches at churchwide events and in his sermons regularly mentions the present-day persecution of Christians and calls upon the faithful to render prayerful support for their brothers and sisters in the Middle East.

In defending Christians, the Russian Orthodox Church cooperates with the Roman Catholic Church as well as with many Protestant communities that show concern for the fate of their suffering brothers and sisters.

The Russian Orthodox Church actively uses the potential of interreligious dialogue in the cause of protecting the rights of Christians in the Middle East. Their situation is most certainly becoming a part of the agenda in dialogue with Islamic leaders and states.

It ought to be said that in Russia the Muslim and Jewish leaders are in solidarity with us on this issue. They have repeatedly spoken out in support of Christians subjected to persecution.

Just a few days ago the international working group visited Syria and Lebanon. In Damascus and the Beqaa Valley, with the direct participation of the local religious leaders, seventy-seven tons of humanitarian aid were delivered to the needy Syrians. It comprised of three thousand food packages of flour, grain, oil, sugar, tins of meat and fish, pasta, sweets and baby food. During this and the previous visits, there took place round tables with representatives of the local religious communities, including representatives of the Christian Churches of the Middle East.

The Russian Orthodox Church and other religious organizations in Russia see their goal in not only the rendering of humanitarian aid to the Syrian people, but also in the promoting of interfaith peace in the land of Syria. It is only thanks to this cooperation that there is a chance of overcoming the grievous consequences of the conflict and of reviving the interreligious balance that existed in the Middle East for centuries.

Also, the Russian Orthodox Church facilitates the process of national reconciliation in Syria. Just a few days ago our representatives participated as observers at the Syrian National Dialogue Congress which took place in Sochi.

I would also like to mention one more aspect of our cooperation – the joint research work aimed at a comprehensive study of the situation in which Christians of the Middle East have found themselves. It is relevant for both overcoming the consequences of the war and for a forecast of future hotbeds of intolerance. I call upon all interested representatives of the expert community to share their experience and share information.

In conclusion of my presentation I would like to express the hope that our conference will become the continuation of the impulse that was made by Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill in Havana. I hope that the common efforts of the Christian Churches will henceforth give comfort to our persecuted brothers and sisters. I believe that with our help they will be able to preserve in the holy land of the Middle East the precious heritage which goes back to the first disciples of Jesus Christ, our common Saviour.

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