Interreligious working group completes unprecedented humanitarian action in Syria and Lebanon



On 9 February 2018, the delegation of the Interreligious working group of Russia's Presidental Council for Cooperation with Religious Organizations completed its visit to Syria and Lebanon.

As part of the visit, a humanitarian action was carried out with the view of rendering assistance to the Syrian people. It was unprecedented in the amount of aid distributed at a time. Besides, it was the first visit to Syria of an interreligious delegation of such level, which included representatives of major Christian and Muslim communities of Russia.

The action was carried out with the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia. His Holiness himself, who supervises the project, made a large contribution.

The funds were raised in the Christian and Muslim communities. Among the active participants in the project were Orthodox, Protestant, Armenian, and Catholic communities, as well as the Central Spiritual Muslim Board of Russia, the Spiritual Muslim Board of Dagestan, and the Spiritual Assembly of Muslims of Russia, and the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society.

The idea to establish an interreligious working group for rendering aid to the Syrian people belongs to Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, under whose general supervision the action was carried out. The decision to set up the working group was taken at a meeting of the Commission for International Cooperation of the Presidential Council for Cooperation with Religious Organizations on February 21, 2017.

The overall weight of the distributed aid was 77 tonnes. It included essential foodstuffs, such as flour, sugar, cereals, pasta, sunflower-seed oil, powdered milk, and canned fish and meat. The foodstuffs were packed in boxes, over 25 kilos each, intended for one family. As is estimated by the Syrian side, such consignment will be sufficient for a family of 3-4 people for at least two weeks. In all, three thousand boxes were packed and distributed. The delegation also brought to Syria the Russian-made chocolate and sweets which they gave out to children. The aid was distributed at 11 sites in Damascus, and at three sites in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon. At the request of the Grand Mufti of Syria, Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, one of the consignments was delivered to Aleppo.

The humanitarian action was organized and carried out by the leaders of both Christian and Muslim communities of Syria and Lebanon. It was distributed by the local Christian and Muslim clergy and by the delegates from Russia. Among those who received the aid were the neediest people who were brought together for that purpose at religious centres in Damascus and Zahlé, as well as child welfare institutions.

During their visit, the delegation members met with religious leaders and representatives of state authorities of Syria and Lebanon. The Syrians noted that the action was unprecedented and expressed their sincere gratitude to the Russian state and to the believers who raised the funds, as well as to the Russian Orthodox Church as its main organizer and to His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia as the initiator and supervisor of the project.

While in Damascus, the humanitarian delegation came under bombardment by terrorists, which continued for two days, targeting the places visited by the Russian delegation. However, the humanitarian action was not stopped; the project was fully implemented. The bombardment of the humanitarian mission gave cause for an official statement of Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence and was on the agenda of a session of the UN Security Council on February 7.

With the blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia and by the decision of Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, Hieromonk Stefan (Igumnov), DECR secretary for inter-Christian relations, led the delegation. The delegation also included Mr. Sergei Melnikov, secretary of Russia's Presidential Domestic Policy Directorate, executive secretary of the Presidential Council for Cooperation with Religious Organizations; Imam Muhtasib Ildar Ziganshin of the Tumen Region, member of the Presidium of the Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia; Mufti Albir Krganov, chairman of the Spiritual Assembly of Muslims of Russia; Mr. Akhmad Kakhayev, first deputy chairman of the Central Muslim Spiritual Board of the Republic of Dagestan; Mr. Sergei Ryakhovsky, senior bishop of the Associated Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith; Archimandrite Poghos Vardanyan, vicar of the head of the Russian and New Nakhichevan diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church; Hieromonk Yermogen (Korchukov), executive director of the Interreligious Foundation for Assistance in Implementation of Joint Humanitarian Projects, steward of the Zaikonospassky Monastery in Moscow; Mr. Sergei Baydakov, head of the Moscow Office of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society; Ms Nelli Kuskova, co-chair of the Committee for Solidarity with the Peoples of Libya and Syria; Imam M. Mirsayapov, head of the International Department of the Spiritual Assembly of Muslims of Russia; Mr. A. Tashtimirov, member of the Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia; Mr. Oleg Fomin, co-chair of the Committee for Solidarity with the Peoples of Libya and Syria; Mr. Hassan Nasralla, chairman of the Arab Diaspora Regional Non-Governmental Organization; and representatives of the Russian TV channels and news agencies.

DECR Communication Service

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