DECR chairman speaks at Athens forum on religious pluralism in Middle East



October 30, 2017 – the second conference on the situation of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East opened at the Intercontinental Hotel in Athens. Its theme is 'Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East'. The first forum on this topic took place in the Greek capital on October 18-20, 2015.

The conference is organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Republic. The forum assembled delegates from 50 countries including Primates of Local Orthodox Churches, representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant communities, Muslim leaders, statesmen, and representatives of international organizations and the academic community.

Among the attendees are Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, Patriarchs Theodore of Alexandria and All Africa, Theophilos of Jerusalem, Archbishops Chrysostomos of New Justiniana and All Cyprus, Ieronymos of All Greece and Anastasios of Tirana and All Albania.

Opening speeches were made by President of the Hellenic Republic Prokopios Pavlopoulos and

Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikolaos Kotzias. They were followed by high-ranking religious and political leaders.

The Russian Orthodox Church was represented by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, head of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations (DECR). Before the beginning of the conference, Metropolitan Hilarion warmly greeted Primates of Local Orthodox Churches. The DECR chairman made a report on the disastrous situation of Christians in the Middle East. He stressed the need to give all possible support to the restoration of the Christian presence in Syria and other Middle East countries: 'The extremists and terrorists have in recent times been surrendering their positions. In Syria, thanks to the decisive actions of the Russian army, they have been almost totally destroyed. De-escalation zones are being set up; conditions are emerging for both the return of civilians and for the restoration of the infrastructure and aid supplies. Today we, the religious and political leaders, representatives of the expert community, must together think of what we can do to return Christians to their homelands'.

After his report the DECR chairman gave an interview to the chief of the Athens office of the Russia Today international news agency, Gennady Melnik.

The conference was attended by heads and representatives of other Christian Churches, including Catholicos Aram of Cilicia, representatives of the Coptic, Maronite and Syriac Orthodox Churches, foreign ministers of Hungary, Austria and other European countries, high-ranking representatives of the Islamic countries including the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and others, the head of the **Bektashi Order** Haji Dede Edmond Brahimaj, the Director of the **American Jewish Committee**'s Department of Interreligious Affairs Rabbi David Rosen, representatives of the UN, Council of Europe, UNESCO and other international organizations.

Key reports were made on various aspects of the problem of the situation of believers in the Middle East and North Africa.

During the forum, which will last till October 31, its participants will attend the reception to be given by Greek Prime Minister A. Tsipras. There will be a concluding press conference to be led by the Hellenic foreign affairs minister N. Kotzias.

Metropolitan Hilarion is accompanied at the forum by Rev. Dimitry Safonov, DECR secretary for interreligious relations, and Hierodeacon Gregory (Sokolov), DECR secretary for inter-Orthodox relations.

DECR Communication Service

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