Presentation by the DECR chairman, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, at the Conference on Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East (19 October 2015, Athens, Greece)

On 19-20 October 2015, the largest conference on the situation of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East took place in Athens. Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk delivered his presentation on the first day of the forum. Its text is given below.

Your Holiness, Your Beatitudes, Your Eminences and Graces,

esteemed participants of the conference,

Today in the Middle East we are witnessing the unprecedented wholesale destruction of Christianity. The endless executions and kidnappings, the destruction of ancient holy sites and the expulsion of Christians from their homelands cannot but alarm the Christian Churches.

'Before our eyes there is unfolding a genuine tragedy, the actual genocide of the Christian population in the lands from which the Good News spread throughout the world. The scale of the catastrophe, passed over in silence by the majority of the world's media, has yet to be realized', is how His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus characterized the situation when speaking before the bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church in February of this year. The Moscow Patriarchate, which has traditionally enjoyed close spiritual and social links with the Middle East, places a priority on this aspect of its external relations.

Christians have endured many trials throughout out their two thousand year history, but the events of recent years are unprecedented. In the twenty first century, at a time of humanity's turbulent development after a series of bloody world wars, we are witnessing, with the silent connivance of world powers, the wholesale uprooting of Christianity and Christian cultures in the place where they came into being.

We know that Muslims and other religious communities also suffer from the activities of extremists; however, it is Christians who are the most defenseless before the face of an enemy that has horrified the whole world. They have become the prime target of terrorists for kidnappings, extortion and murder. At the same time terrorists carry out their criminal activities under the guise of religion.

I will quote some figures that characterize the scale of the calamity. In Iraq, for example, the number of Christians over the past twelve years has decreased by more than ten times; those who remain find themselves today in a catastrophic position, deprived of all property and all hope of a peaceful and prosperous future. Over the past year alone more than a hundred thousand Christians have left Iraq. It is impossible to calculate the damage that has been caused to ancient Christian churches and other historical monuments.

Mass executions take place in Libya of absolutely innocent Christians, a once stable country has been turned into an arena of tribal wars, to be a Christian there is extremely dangerous. Of one hundred thousand Christians there only a few thousand remain, and the threat to their lives continues.

Up until 2011 an inter-religious balance was maintained in Syria. Yet the extremists who have intervened in the country have spread genuine bloody terror to Christians. We still know nothing of the fate of Metropolitans Paul (Yazidji) of Aleppo and Gregory John (Ibrahim), kidnapped two and a half years ago. Almost two hundred Assyrians are held in captivity by ISIL, kidnapped in February of this year in the valley of the River Kabur. Three of them were recently executed by terrorists. The Christian quarters of Damascus and Aleppo are subject to endless gunfire.

At present more than a quarter of Christians have left Syria. And this figure continues to grow. People are fleeing from terror, from the horrors of war, from a hopeless future for themselves and their children. There is a real danger that the Middle East - the cradle of Christianity - will belong wholly to extremists.

Tragically, few western politicians have listened to the voices of Christian leaders who have called for, and continue to call for, an end to supplying militants with arms.

Irreparable damage has been caused to the ancient cultural heritage of the Middle East. The religious and cultural balance that has come into being over centuries has been destroyed. I have spoken many times with the religious and political leaders of Syria and Iraq. They have spoken of how great efforts are needed for even a partial restoration of the infrastructure and a return to normal life.

The Russian Orthodox Church has always and everywhere endeavoured to draw attention to the plight of Christians. Church representatives have invariably put this issue on the agenda with the political, public and religious leaders of both east and west. In conducting dialogue with Muslims, the Russian Orthodox Church accentuates the need to defend Christians from extremists. We support our brothers and sisters morally and materially as best we can. Much effort has been put into informing the population in both Russia and beyond her borders of the truth concerning the catastrophe that has unfolded.

We hope that the world can draw a lesson from the most wide-scale humanitarian tragedy of recent years. We call upon politicians, who bear responsibility for what is happening, to make all efforts to defend Christians and guarantee the return to their homes and to the lands of which they are native inhabitants.

I would like to remind you once more that the loss of the Christian presence in the Middle East will have irrevocable consequences. If no Christians remain, then the barrier which holds back the spread of radicalism will also be removed.

To conclude my presentation I would like once more to assure the Christians of the Middle East of our solidarity with you. The entire Church is filled with concern and prayer for those who suffer for the name of Christ, for, as St. Paul says, 'we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones' (Eph. 5: 30). We feel your pain for the trials that have befallen you, and treat with profound respect your courageous and firm stance for Christ's Truth.

I hope that this conference will allow all of us not only to express our solidarity in relation to regulating the situation in the Middle East, but will also become a calling sign for those in whose hands the fate of the much-suffering biblical lands rests.

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/50088/