Metropolitan Hilarion: Persecutions against Christians are unprecedented

The events in Ukraine have diverted the world community's attention from the global problem of persecution against Christians, steadily growing in many parts of the world, especially in the Middle East and Africa. One in four Christians in the world is subjected to persecution today. People are ousted from their native lands; their rights are infringed; they are kidnapped and killed on the grounds of faith. The scale of the unfolding historical drama, its causes and ways of overcoming the escalation of the violence, the aid given to persecuted Christians in Syria and other countries are discussed in an interview given to RIA-Novosti journalist Olga Lipich by the head of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external church relations, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk.

- **It is not for the first year that we hear from church representatives disturbing reports about a decrease in the Christian population in the Middle East and North Africa. This problem was also discussed by heads of Orthodox Church during the celebrations marking the 1025 anniversary of the Baptism of Rus' in Moscow, Kiev and Minsk and during the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Korea and during the March pan-Orthodox meeting in Istanbul. Is there any progress in this matter?**

- Christianity remains the most persecuted religion in the world. According to statistics received in the latest studies, since 2007 the number of countries, in which Christians are persecuted, has doubled from 24 in 2007 to 47 in the late 2012. Today, one in four Christians in the world is subjected to discrimination on religious grounds. The problem of the oppression of religious minorities is very acute in many regions.

One of the most problem regions is the Middle East – the cradle of Christianity. We can see that where extremists become influential, there religious minorities are subjected not only to discrimination and oppression but often to full-scale persecution.

Fundamentalism and extremism under religious slogans are spreading from country to country. It is no longer possible to speak of the discrimination of religious minorities as some individual local incidents, as there is a stable tendency in some regions of the world. Notably, there is a mass exodus of Christians from the Middle East.

For this reason Christian leaders have increasingly stated the facts of persecution against Christians. Of a very great importance, in particular, was the statement made by heads of local Orthodox Churches

who assembled in March in Istanbul.

In our contacts with representatives of Islam, we seek to bring to their notice our concern over the facts of persecution against Christians committed by those who come out under Muslim slogans. Just the other day, there was a regular meeting of the joint working group of the Russian Orthodox Church and Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs, focused on the situation of religious minorities in the world. The director of the Presidency's foreign affairs department Mehmet Pacagi, who led the Turkish delegation, agreed with us that the problem of religiously motivated extremism and terrorism is very acute and presents a common threat both to Christians and Muslims. Our Turkish partners understood our concern for the destiny of the Middle Eastern Christians.

- How is infringement upon the rights of Christians manifested today? How dangerous is it for them to remain in the counties of the Middle East and Africa and why do many remain there in spite of the threats?

- At present in the Middle East there are unprecedented persecutions of Christians. The rapid spread of terrorism and extremism on religious grounds has led to a real genocide to which Christian communities in some countries are subjected. We regularly receive reports about a Christian church being defiled or destroyed, a priest being kidnapped, a Christian beheaded, a mass grave of murdered Christians found, Christian families driven away from their homes or put under tribute, a Christian quarter shelled. Extremists have as their aim to banish Christians from their homes by terror or physical elimination. Many Christians in the Middle East fearing such fate have to escape to other countries.

Leaders of Christian Churches in the Middle East have stated with one voice that Christians should stay in their places as natives who had lived there long before the appearance of Islam. Many are ready to remain in their homeland and to follow Christ till the bitter end and to suffer martyrdom if need be. Quite recently, Father Frans van der Lugt, a 75-year old Catholic priest, who has lived in Syrian Holms for half a century, refused to leave the city because he wished to share the fate of Christians who remained there.

I have said on several occasions that Western countries, which have helped Christians in the region for centuries, now have denied them support and almost officially recommended them to leave the region and settle in other countries. I have been told this by, for instance, Maronites who have lived in Syria and Lebanon for centuries. They have been disappointed in France which has historically supported them and now refuses to protect them. Our country has remained the only defender of the Christian presence in the region. Many Christians remaining in "hotbeds" have set their hopes on it.

- In what do you see the principal causes of killings, kidnappings and generally persecution

against Christians in the Middle East in our days? What can be proposed to settle the problem?

- I would like to notice that the events of the so-call Arab Spring are developing according to the same scenario. In Libya and Egypt and Iraq there were “authoritarian regimes”, as they were categorically assessed in the West. The USA and a number of European countries did all possible to make these governments fall, accounting for it by a desire to build democratic societies after the Western fashion, though every time the change of power was made through force and revolution with no account taken of the historical and religious traditions which used to build through centuries the relations between local communities. This resulted in the aggravation of internal controversies encouraging extremists and terrorists to flock to these countries from other regions of the world.

Another cause of the persecution lies in the wide spread of radical religious views – the situation which influential forces in the Gulf are interested in. Often there are cases when in Islamic countries, a crowd of excited Muslims, after the imam’s Friday sermon, would go to attack Christian churches.

In my view, to resolve the problem of persecution and discrimination against Christians it is necessary to activate, first, political leverage. In the countries in which religious minorities are persecuted a clear mechanism of their protection from discrimination and persecution should begin working under control by the world community. The most developed powers should give political or economic support to the authorities in these countries only if they give firm guarantees that their religious minorities will be protected.

Secondly, it is very important that religious leaders should educate their flock for tolerance towards people of other faiths.

- Which countries remain the main flashpoints of tension? How has the life of the Copts and other Christians in Egypt changed with the coming of a new power?

- The situation of the Christian community in Syria has caused the greatest concern. Christians in that country used to amount to 10% of the population (about 2 million people). I have been to that country several times and could see how people of different religions used to co-exist before the armed confrontation began. But now there are various armed bands are at work, systematically eliminating Christians and people of other religious communities.

According to the available data, over one thousand Christians have been killed and about one hundred Christian churches and monasteries have been damaged. Over 600 thousand Christians have had to leave their homes, most of them fleeing to other countries. Quite recently, on March 2014, a group of

radicals attacked the town of Kesab in northern Syria, populated by Armenians. Almost all the population had to flee because they remained without sustenance. In late March in Damascus, the Jeramana Christian quarter was shelled again; in Aleppo, a mortar shell hit an Armenian church. We are very much concerned for the future of the Valley of Christians – a region in Syria to which Christians from Homs and other cities occupied by militants have had to move. Recently there have been attempts by militants to attack them. For the time being, the attacks have been repulsed.

In Iraq, for the last ten years the number of Christians has decreased tenfold. While they were about a million and a half before, now fewer than 150 thousand have remained and they live mostly in the part controlled by the Kurds.

As for Christians in Egypt, the present authorities do not persecute them; the climate of interreligious relations has considerably improved. However, the adherents of Islamic radical parties continue committing attacks. Quite recently, a young woman from among the Coptic Christians, Mary Sameh, was brutally killed during an attack on a church in Cairo.

In Pakistan, there is a strict law “On Blasphemy” in force. This law is often abused to settle personal accounts with Christians notwithstanding the fact that this law provides for death penalty. Besides, there are regular pogroms of Christian quarters and attacks on Christians. On September 22, 2013, in Peshawar, a monstrous act of terror was committed with the death toll of 81 and 145 people injured. A day later, a crowd of radical Muslims sacked a Christian quarter in Lahore.

A sorrowful situation has developed after 2011 in Libya. A great part of its small Christian community as it is has had to flee the country. Those who have remained, mostly Egyptian Copts, are subjected to regular attacks, often with lethal end.

The ideology of religious extremism and hatred is actively spreading to other African countries. The weakness of governmental authorities in some African states has generated an aggravation of interreligious confrontations.

In Nigeria, a considerable number of Christians are perishing at the hands of extremists. The radical group called “Boko Haram” as well as nomadic Muslim tribes make regular attacks on Christian villages, mercilessly killing those they meet on their way. Hardly a week passes without a new report coming to us about the murder of tens and even hundreds of Christians in the country. According to the official statistics alone, 1200 Christians were killed in 2013 in Nigeria.

In Somalia, the radical Islamic group called “Ash-Shabaab” has declared an open war on Christians. Recently in the city of Barawa, the militants of this group beheaded two Christians under the very eyes

of their children. This case is far from being the only one in the chain of similar ones. Ash-Shabaad radicals stand behind many anti-Christian acts of terror in neighbouring countries. Islamists are going to get rid of Christians fully and to do it they are ready as much as to commit any crime, as they have openly stated.

Continued attacks on Christians are committed in Zanzibar Island in Tanzania. In a number of South-East Africa, Christian minorities are facing persecution and discrimination by adherents to radical forms of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam.

- Recently in Syria, captive nuns from the town of Maalula have been released, but other representatives of Christian clergy remain captive, particularly, two metropolitans who were kidnapped as far back as two years ago. Do you know anything about their fate?

- Regrettably, only unverified reports are coming. In particular, the information that one of the metropolitans was killed or injured in crossfire. There were also reports that the metropolitans are held in the frontier strip in Turkey. None of these reports have been confirmed.

- What aid has the Russian Orthodox Church given and intends to give to her brothers in faith? Where exactly in the hotbeds in the Middle East and Africa do her representatives serve today and what problem do they encounter?

- For the Russian Orthodox Church, aid to Christians, who have found themselves in the gravest possible situation in the Middle East and North Africa, is one of the most important concerns in her external work. His Holiness the Patriarch and the Holy Synod always keep an eye on it.

We seek to give our persecuted brothers in faith all-round aid. Thus, last summer, with a blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, all parishes in Russia raised and sent over 1,3 million US dollars to the Orthodox Church of Antioch. The Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society, with a blessing of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill, is engaged in collecting and sending humanitarian cargos to be distributed in Syria both to Christians and Muslims. As many as nine humanitarian aid shipments were already sent to Damascus, with a tenth one underway. In addition, in the course of meetings with political and religious leaders on international platforms, our church representatives have continually raised the problem of persecution and discrimination against Christians.

As for the church presence in hotbeds, I can say that not so long ago a new priest was assigned to represent the Russian Orthodox Church to the Patriarch of Antioch and All the East. It is Hegumen Arseny (Sokolov), who has recently defended his doctoral dissertation at the Ss Cyril and Methodius Institute of Post-Graduate Studies. He stays in Beirut, Lebanon, but makes regular visits to Syria.

Our clergy serve in other countries, too, where the situation is destabilized but where there is a need for pastoral care of the Russian-speaking community.

- How do you assess the inter-Orthodox, inter-Christian and interreligious efforts to help establish peace and preserve the Christian presence in the land where Christianity was born?

- It is gratifying that many Christian churches are not indifferent to the situation which has developed in the Middle East countries. It could not be otherwise, since fraternal help and support are key notions for Christians.

The Russian Orthodox Church is actively and consistently advocates the rights of the Christian population in the Middle East to peaceful life and free confession of their faith. The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church has repeatedly appealed to world leaders and the international community to help stop as soon as possible the bloodshed in the lands of Christian historical presence.

Support for Christians in the Middle East and North Africa and compassion for the victims of war in Syria were expressed by participants in the meeting of Primates and representatives of Local Orthodox Churches, which took place on March 6-9, 2014, in Istanbul. In the year since the election of Pope Francis to the apostolic throne, I happened to meet him twice, and we had as one of the main topics of our talks the problem of preserving Christian heritage and protecting the Christian population of the Middle East. I would like to note that the Pontiff of Rome shares our concern for the fate of Christians in the regions.

I have invariably raised the problem of the miserable situation of followers of Christ during meetings and events attended by representatives of Protestant churches as well as traditional religious communities, first of all, Muslim.

Nevertheless, I believe the inter-Orthodox and interreligious cooperation in protecting the Christian minority in the Middle East countries could be more effective. I hope that an increasing number of Christian churches and traditional religious communities will be involved in this important mission. It is only together that we can save our brothers and sisters from violence in the old blessed lands where the very term “Christian” originated.

- What can be said about the work of international organizations and leading countries of the world? Is it effective enough?

- As is known, on January 21, 2011, the European Parliament adopted a resolution “On the Situation of Christians in the Context of Freedom of Religion”, condemning the cases of persecution of Christians in Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and the Philippines. This resolution proposed a mechanism to monitor the observance of freedom of conscience in the world and provide for sanctions against violator states. Three years have passed since but the mechanism mentioned in the resolution has never been established.

Blood has been shed for over three years now in Syria. Her faithful sons and daughters have been killed and driven out but international institutions have failed to react to violations of the rights of civilians, including Christians, in the country. I would say even more: the actions and statements made by a number of representatives of Western powers contribute not to the healing of wounds inflicted on the country by the armed confrontation but rather to further polarization of the society. I believe all the world political forces, who have been involved in the Syrian crisis, should show a responsible attitude to the developments in Syria, proceeding from the interests of the Syrian people.

- Should we expect a solution of the Syrian problem from the next round of talks in Geneva or some alternative ways are needed? What prospects are there for the development of the situation around Christians in the Middle East?

- I would like to note that the Russian Orthodox Church, which keenly feels the tragic events in the old Syrian land, had great hopes for the two rounds of peace talks “Geneva-2”. The very fact of the presence of warring parties at the negotiation table could become a turning point in the efforts to stop the bloodshed in the country. A considerable time has elapsed since the end of the conference, but civilians still perish today as before, churches are destroyed, millions of Syrians wander in search for a refuge. And all this happens not because peace talks were fully fruitless but because the financial and military support for terrorist forces continue coming from outside. I believe it is necessary to continue insisting on an unconditional refusal to support the fundamentalists. As I have already mentioned, quite recently the world public was terrified by the merciless execution of Armenians in the Syrian town of Kesab. It is strange that this evil deed has not been met with condemnation by the international community, as international organizations passed it over in silence, while the world mass media limited itself to niggardly reports. In spite of this, the Russian Orthodox Church does not give up attempts to draw the attention of national governments and international institutions to what happened in Kesab and generally to the problem of violence and eviction of Christians from that country and the Middle East region as a whole.

Source: https://mospat.ru/en/news/51535/