



Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk: Russian Church has called for alliance in defence of African Christians



Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, spoke at an international online conference on the Plight of Christians in Africa. The text of his address is given below.

Dear fathers, brothers and sisters,

I greet you at an international online conference on the Plight of Christians in Africa and thank the Russian Association for Protection of Religious Freedom and Rossiya Segodnya International News Agency for organising this meeting. Despite the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, we have an opportunity to discuss the topic of great importance.

The beginning of the 21st century was marked by large-scale persecutions of Christians in various regions of the world. For a long period, Christians in the Middle East, especially in Syria, were in desperate plight. At some point, there was a threat of total extinction of Christians in that ancient Biblical land. I believe that through concerted efforts we managed to prevent it. Today, peaceful life in Syria is

already returning to normal. Thanks to the Russian state and the Russian religious communities, the restoration of the country's infrastructure, schools, churches and monasteries is under way. Gradually, Christians and other Syrian citizens are coming back home.

Rendering support to suffering brothers is seen by the Russian Orthodox Church as its historical mission. Devoting the closest attention to the issue of defending the persecuted Christians, His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia points out that Africa has now become the epicentre of oppression. Almost each and every day our Christian brothers and sisters are being killed and persecuted for their faith there. Meanwhile, in Africa today there is the world's fastest-growing Christian community. Terrorists' attacks can break this tendency.

Particularly hard is the plight of Christians residing in the regions south of the Sahara. His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, in his address at the interfaith summit in Baku on 14th November 2019, noted that Christians in Nigeria were subjected to real genocide, and called upon the world religious leaders to raise their voice in their defence.

Indeed, in Nigeria terrorists are destroying entire Christian villages, persecuting their residents on religious grounds. Only a short time ago, Abubakar Shekau, leader of Boko Haram terrorist group (banned in the territory of Russia – note), claimed that it had been responsible for the abduction of over 300 schoolboys in Katsina state on 12th December this year. Boko Haram has also announced that Christians should await new bloody attacks on Christmas eve.

Another hotbed of persecutions is in East Africa, namely Somalia, Kenya and neighbouring countries. Responsible for the persecutions of Christians there is militant group al-Shabaab. These terrorists' favourite tactic is to attack intercity buses. During the attacks, they separate Muslims from Christians and kill the latter.

While crushed in the Middle East, ISIS (banned in the territory of Russia – note), has step up its presence in the African countries. Earlier, Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Shabaab (banned in Russia – note) in Somalia expressed their solidarity with ISIS. Lately, the Islamic State Central Africa Province has been increasingly active, having claimed responsibility for a number of terror attacks and assaults on civilians in the territory of Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Causing concern is the situation of Christians in Algeria, where recently the state has been clearly trying to put Christian communities under stronger pressure. In particular, they are being denied re-registration more frequently now, and security officials are compiling a register containing information about religious affiliation of school teachers.

Ethiopia has also become a new hotbed of persecutions of Christians. Against the background of a political crisis that began in the country in the middle of 2019, the Ethiopian Church and its faithful have been subjected to targeted attacks. Hundreds of Christians fell victim to horrible massacres; thousands of them are now refugees in their own country.

The major goal of this conference is to consolidate efforts of the Christian confessions and international organisations supporting African Christians. We should regularly exchange information on the latest developments and, first and foremost, lay the groundwork for the voice of the suffering African Christians to be heard. At the same time, we need to look at the ways to combine our efforts in implementing joint humanitarian initiatives on the African continent.

The Russian Orthodox Church and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation have already taken steps in this direction. For instance, we have put forward a proposal to add the issue of persecution of Christians to the agenda of the Russia–Africa Summit.

On behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church, I would like to call upon all the concerned parties, first of all, Christian Churches and associations, to form an alliance in defence of the persecuted Christians in Africa. I believe that a strong platform for such alliance must be created as the result of today's discussions.

While exerting humanitarian efforts, the Russian Orthodox Church adheres to the rule, according to which any such actions must be coordinated with local church communities and organisations. One cannot express a wish to help persecuted Christians and at the same time ignore their point of view. I am convinced that we need to follow the same rule in the case of Africa. Only together we will be able to successfully accomplish the task ahead.

Thank you for your attention!