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January 3, 2011

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today expressed concern that Greek Orthodox Christians were refused the right to celebrate a Christmas Liturgy service in the village of Rizokarpaso, in the area of the Republic of Cyprus under the control of Turkish troops and administered by Turkish Cypriot authorities. Turkish Cypriot police entered the Church of Saint Sinesios and demanded that worship activities cease because the local Turkish Cypriot authorities had not granted the congregation permission for the service.

“It is wrong and a symbol of religious intolerance and repressive policies of the Turkish Cypriot authorities supported by Turkey’s occupation troops to require such a small church community to seek permission to hold Christmas Liturgy,” said Commission Chair Leonard Leo. “Requiring such permission is simply a bureaucratic ploy that violates the universally protected right to freedom of religion and belief. The Greek Orthodox population has declined steadily in the area of Cyprus under the control of the local Turkish Cypriot authorities and Turkey’s occupation troops. The Turkish Cypriot authorities’ suggestion that such a small religious community would require advanced crowd control planning is not credible. We urge the U.S. government to press Turkish Cypriot authorities to remove any hurdles imposed on Greek Orthodox Christians that prevent them from freely practicing their faith.”

In 1960, the Greek Orthodox population in Rizokarpaso was estimated at 3,000 and was part of approximately 180,000 Greek Orthodox living in the northern part of Cyprus. Today, there are approximately 350 Greek Orthodox adherents enclaved in Rizokarpaso. According to State Department reports, the church was one of seven religious sites in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots where religious services could be performed on a regular basis without receiving advanced permission. The denial of the Christmas service runs counter to those claims.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

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