

“What USCIRF Learned in Carrying Out Resolution 1631”

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Workshop on Protecting the Cultural Heritage of Cyprus:

Joining Efforts in Preventing

the Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Heritage

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Introduction

Good morning.

It’s my pleasure to join all of you today. I’m grateful for the opportunity to address you this morning, and I especially want to thank all of the organizers and sponsors for bringing us all together and making this workshop possible.

Before I begin, let me introduce myself and the commission I represent. I’m Elizabeth Prodromou and I serve as Vice Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (or USCIRF). This is an independent, bipartisan commission created by the United States Congress through the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA).

Our mandate is to monitor and report on the status of freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international

instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and members of Congress.

Today, I want to discuss the illegal trafficking of cultural artifacts from the perspective gained by USCIRF as a result of our visit to the north of Cyprus between February 19 and February 21 of this year. From our trip and from an international religious freedom perspective, we found three main issues in the north of Cyprus: “1) the inability of Orthodox Christians, Maronites, Armenians, and other religious communities, to access and hold services at their places of worship and cemeteries in the north, particularly those that exist within the borders of Turkish military bases and zones; 2) the disrepair and desecration of churches, cemeteries and monasteries, and general issues relating to the preservation of religious heritage, such as iconography, mosaics, and other religious artifacts and symbols; and 3) the lack of schools and opportunities for young people in the north, which has led to an exodus of Greek Cypriots and other religious minorities.”

Background for USCIRF’s February 2011 Trip to Northern Cyprus

Allow me to offer some background on our trip to the island earlier this year. The impetus for our travel to Cyprus and, specifically, to the north of Cyprus, came in September of last year, when the U.S. House of Representatives passed House Resolution 1631, which included a call for USCIRF “to investigate and make recommendations on violations of

religious freedom in the areas of northern Cyprus under the control of the Turkish military.”

House Resolution 1631 reflected the concerns of Congress on a host of matters, such as the illicit trading of religious and cultural artifacts, and issues pertaining to religious freedom in northern Cyprus such as religious communities being denied free access to their places of worship.

The resolution echoed what USCIRF commissioners had heard in July of 2009, when we received a delegation in Washington led by Andreas Kakouris, who at the time was the Republic of Cyprus Ambassador to the United States.

This delegation included three individuals who may be familiar to many of you here today and whose briefing included detailed reporting, including photographic evidence and supporting data from international organizations, the ongoing limitations on access to and worship at Greek Orthodox Christian sites, and the destruction and/or vandalism of Greek Orthodox churches, monasteries and seminaries in the area of Cyprus under the control of the Turkish military and by local Turkish Cypriot authorities.

The opportunity to travel to northern Cyprus provided USCIRF a first-hand perspective on the religious freedom issues that had been brought to the Commission’s attention and that persist in the northern area. In the short time that I have for my presentation, what I will do is share with you is a basic account

of what our USCIRF delegation heard, saw, and concluded during our time on the island in our visit to the north. After doing so, I will wrap up my remarks with the recommendations USCIRF has made in its 2011 Annual Report – recommendations relating to violations and restrictions on religious freedom, the disrepair of churches, and the removal of religious artifacts from these churches. Our visit under Resolution 1613 offers insights into the relevance of religious freedom for a full exploration and understanding of the subject of this workshop, showing the connections between religious freedom and cultural heritage.

What We Heard

So what did we actually *hear* during our trip? During our time on the island, we met with religious leaders from civil society and the Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Armenian and Jewish communities; these included both members of the hierarchy and clergy, as well as lay persons; and we also met with local TC authorities in the north of the island.

All these communities – Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, Armenian and Jewish – reported restrictions and violations of one form or another on religious freedom. Of particular note was the fact that churches, other places of worship and cemeteries that exist within the borders of Turkish military bases or zones are virtually inaccessible, which is a violation of Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The declaration states, “Everyone has the right to freedom of

thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

The lack of access to places of worship and cemeteries on Turkish military bases or zones denies religious communities the opportunity to publically or privately manifest their religious worship.

Those with whom we met also reported to our delegation that cemeteries have been desecrated; grave stones have been overturned and broken; religious artifacts had been stolen, looted, and in some cases, sold; the conversion of churches to stables and military supply storehouses and auto repair shops; religious communities must submit applications to Turkish Cypriot authorities in order to gain access to and use of places of worship, as well as to any related religious sites, such as cemeteries; the entry of wild animals into religious sites in disrepair; and likewise, we were told about limitations on the actual participation of individual Greek Orthodox hierarchs in church services; the severe disrepair of the St. Andreas Monastery; and videotaping and surveillance of some bishops and the enclaved Greek Orthodox population by TC plain-clothed local.

We also heard greater details of a Christmas liturgy incident at the Church of St. Synesios.

We were also told about the looting of religious and cultural treasures and their illegal sale abroad.

Specifically, concerning religious artifacts, we also heard from local Turkish Cypriot authorities, who reported to us that they have several warehouses of religious art in Kyrenia and that the art has been catalogued. They reported that the art had been removed for safekeeping from looters and for preservation.

What We Saw

Now, let me highlight some of the visuals—what we actually saw—in addition to what we heard.

On our first full day on Cyprus, our delegation crossed the green line at the Nicosia crossing point.

We gained access to a Turkish military base located within the village of Kythrea to visit the Greek Orthodox church of St. George. The church was a skeletal structure. Its walls were cracked and the altar was gone, along with all religious art and artifacts. The building bore no conceivable resemblance to a church. Before travelling to Cyprus, we received various reports from the Washington Embassy of the Republic of Cyprus that the Turkish military was using this church for storage purposes. However, since it had taken several weeks for the U.S. embassy to obtain us access to the Turkish military base and permission to view the church, when we entered, we found nothing inside the absolutely empty structure; and, it had obviously been cleaned out for our visit, as it was empty and the floors appeared

to have been recently swept. The sterile environment raised questions about where were the religious artifacts, but no Turkish military officials were available for us to pose these inquiries.

We also travelled to the Church of St. Synesios in the village of Rizokarpaso, the location of the widely-reported-in-the-media (I Christmas liturgy incident.

The doors of the church were locked and we had to wait for someone to unlock them.

While in the village of Rizokarpaso, we had the opportunity to talk to local Orthodox Cypriot Christians who attend the church. Here, we witnessed for ourselves Turkish Cypriots photographing and video-taping us, as occurred at every stop throughout our travels in the northern part of the island.

On the drive up to St. Andreas Monastery, we made an unscheduled stop at a church that had a mosque next to it. We entered the church which, like the one we had seen on the Turkish military base in Kythrea, was a totally gutted structure—every single religious artifact — from icons, to icon screen, to altar table, to chairs—was gone, and the church was a skeletal structure. The only item in the entire building was a broken icon on the floor—this was a small icon, made not of wood, but of pressed board, and appeared to have been placed inside by someone. However, when we picked up the icon, we found that the eyes of the saint depicted on the icon had been scratched out. While we don't know if it was the act of vandals and robbers or if it was part of a systematic destruction, it served

as an added reminder that religious artifacts and property are not being protected in northern Cyprus. We saw many churches that were crumbling and unmaintained.

We concluded our visit to religious sites in the north of the island at St. Andreas Monastery.

There, we met with Father Zacharias. We observed the acute disrepair of the monastery structure. We were taken into the inner sanctuary of the monastery, and saw holes in the roof and cracks in the wall. We asked about repairs (e.g. holes in the roof above the altar table) but were told that local Turkish Cypriot authorities will not allow any repairs—we cannot even put up a ladder to close the hole in the roof or put on a coat of paint, he said—without the permission of local Turkish Cypriot authorities.

This is what we *saw* during our stay in northern Cyprus.

What We Concluded

So what did we conclude from what we saw and heard during our trip to northern Cyprus?

As I mentioned earlier, the Commission drew three main conclusions from the trip, two of which are relevant to our gathering today – first, the inability for Orthodox Christians, Maronites, Armenians, and other religious minority communities in the northern part of the island under the control of the Turkish military and Turkish Cypriot authorities to access and use places of worship, and second the disrepair of churches

and severe problems of preserving religious heritage, such as iconography and mosaics.

We included our findings and recommendations about our Cyprus visit in our overall designation of Turkey to USCIRF's Watch List, given Turkey's military control over northern Cyprus. You can locate our findings on the USCIRF website at www.uscirf.gov, where you can also read our full annual report, including the portion of the chapter on Turkey, in which we discuss our findings under Resolution 1631.

The inability of religious communities to access their places of worship, combined with the destruction or looting of sacred religious artifacts, produces real and troubling limitations on religious freedoms for individuals and religious communities living in the north.

Therefore, the Commission found that religious minority communities have indeed been intimidated and substantially diluted through a web of arbitrary regulations and reported harassment by the Turkish Cypriot authorities. In particular, Orthodox Christians, as well as other religious communities and their clergy had limited access to places of worship and to hold services, particularly those that exist within the borders of Turkish military bases and zones.

Second, partly because of these restrictions, the Commission concluded the need for greater protection of churches and cemeteries were in serious disrepair, and religious art, as well as

for religious artifacts such as iconography, mosaics, and other religious symbols. This is for both art and religious artifacts still within churches and those artifacts that are reportedly in local Turkish Cypriot hands.

Indeed, according to the Republic of Cyprus and Christian and Jewish leaders, approximately 500 monasteries, churches, and cemeteries in northern Cyprus have been purposely desecrated, are in ruins due to the negligence of Turkish and Turkish Cypriot authorities, or are being used for non-religious purposes such as storage or community halls.

Finally, iconography, mosaics, and other religious symbols have indeed been damaged and looted from churches, and many can be found on the black market. While Turkish Cypriot authorities claim that many of these items were removed from churches in order to protect them from looters and black market thieves and that they are being stored in several warehouses in Kryenia, the Commission expressed serious concern over whether the ancient religious art was being stored and catalogued adequately.

What We Recommend

In light of our visit in response to House Resolution 1631's call for USCIRF to investigate and make recommendations on religious freedom violations in areas of northern Cyprus under the control of the Turkish military," we generated several recommendations for the U.S. government—again, these can be found on the USCIRF website. Generally, they urge the United States to

press the Turkish government and/or Turkish Cypriot authorities to do the following:

- Allow religious minority communities living in northern Cyprus access to religious sites, places of worship, and cemeteries that are located within the borders of Turkish military bases and zones in northern Cyprus, as well as the right to restore, maintain, and utilize them;
- Abandon all restrictions on the access and use of churches and other places of worship, including requiring applications for permission to hold religious services;
- Return all religious places of worship and cemeteries to their rightful owners; cease any ongoing desecration and destruction of Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Armenian Orthodox, and Jewish religious properties; and cease using any such religious sites as stables, military storage sites, vehicle repair shops, and public entertainment venues or for any other non-religious purpose;
- Permit the restoration of the St. Andreas monastery and other churches located in northern Cyprus;
- Return Christian religious iconography and other religious art that is in the hands of Turkish Cypriot authorities and that remain in churches to their rightful owners; and
- Provide a full list of catalogued religious artifacts and allow access by UNESCO authorities, if UNESCO deems it appropriate and necessary to review such materials under

possession of the Turkish Cypriot authorities and/or the Turkish military.

Summary and Conclusion

To sum up: Make no mistake. The restrictions on religious freedom in northern Cyprus by the Turkish military and local Turkish Cypriot authorities, especially on the ability of Orthodox Christians to maintain and repair church property, help create the conditions where religious art such as iconography can be stolen, removed and sold on the black market. It is our hope that the authorities will be persuaded to act with greater responsibility to protect these cultural and religious treasures.

Thank you.