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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Jubilee Campaign, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[29 January 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



The Status of Communities of Faith in Ukraine Following the Russian Federation’s 2022 Incursion

Jubilee Campaign would like to raise to the Commission’s attention the specific rights violations communities of faith in Ukraine have been subjected to in the two years since the Russian Federation’s incursion in February 2022.

Damage to Religious Infrastructure and Surrounding Areas

The Ukrainian Institute for Religious Freedom in early 2023 counted no fewer than 494 religious sites that had been subject to occupation, damage, destruction, and/or looting both directly and indirectly.[1] The Institute for the Study of War, which focuses exclusively on incidents of religious persecution characterized by intentionality, noted 78 such cases. This number can be further stratified: 25 Ukrainian places of worship “closed, nationalized, or forcefully converted” by Russian actors; 13 occupied, desecrated, and purposefully destroyed; and the remaining 40 incidents of religious persecution involve violations against religious leaders and congregants.[2]

Noteworthy incidents: 2022

In August 2022, Russian troops arbitrarily shut down Melitopol Christian Church, dismantling the large cross and transforming the church campus into a “cultural sports entertainment complex”. Russian troops additionally closed World of Life Church, and in nearby Chkalovo in September they dispersed worshippers at a local church before shutting down the building. In September 2022, Russian occupiers ambushed a worship service at Grace Baptist Church in Melitopol, interrupting proceedings and recording the names of all participants; a live broadcast recording of the church service included the confrontation but was later scrubbed from the internet. To the north, forces looted the Lysychansk Christian Centre, disposing of bibles and religious children’s books.[3]

Noteworthy incidents: 2023

In April 2023, Head of the Military Administration of the Ukrainian city of Berdyansk, Viktoriya Halitsina, reported that Russian troops seized the Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in response to unproven accusations that church leadership had been providing weapons to Ukrainian opposition forces.[4] On Orthodox Easter Sunday, while Russian President Vladimir Putin and his security outfit attended a worship service at Moscow’s Christ the Saviour Cathedral, Ukrainian citizens were sharing images on social media of a church in Zaporizhzhia which was bombed hours prior by Russian troops just as Orthodox Easter began.[5] That same month, Petro Andryushchenko, adviser to Mariupol Mayor Vadym Boychenko, reported that between ten and thirty Russian soldiers had taken over the Ukrainian Evangelical Church of the Holy Trinity after forcing clergy to exit. Andryushchenko additionally noted that “Russian occupiers had targeted the church at least in part because it provided a ‘human shield’ for troops, located only five meters from...residential buildings”.[6] In late July, Russian troops severely damaged Transfiguration Cathedral in Odessa, and the following month in Kherson, the revered St. Catherine’s Cathedral was partially damaged via shelling, and a second round of bombs wounded four emergency workers who had arrived on scene to extinguish a fire resulting from the first attack.[7]

Violations and atrocities against religious leaders

In July 2023, Verstka identified 49 incidents of religious persecution against clergy, including arrests, abductions, captures, torture, and murder; this number is further stratified to denote 18 cases in which victims were forced to flee their city, go into hiding, or cease all religious activities; 12 cases involving the outright expulsion of faith leaders; eight cases of detention; and five killings.[8]

Noteworthy incidents: 2022

In February 2022, Russian troops shot and killed Orthodox priest and military chaplain of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Maksym Anatolyovych Kozachyn, while he was attempting to leave a village in Kyiv's Ivano-Frankivsk district.[9] In March, Russian soldiers made a surprise night attack on the home of Melitopol Christian Church pastor Viktor Sergeev who, along with other neighborhood clergy and parishioners, was arraigned and interrogated while local houses were searched and residents fled.[10] Russian troops tortured Imam Rustem Asanov of the Crimean Tatar Muslim community in Kherson's Schastlivtsevo village, who they accused of being affiliated with the Ukrainian armed forces; the perpetrators "kicked me in the ribs and spine.... They said 'there will be no Ukraine, forget about it, soon we will destroy all of Ukraine'".[11] A Mariupol pastor Vladislav Shabanets spent 105 days in Russian captivity simply for evacuating residents from the city for safety reasons.[12] In March 2022, Russian soldiers invaded Yasnohorodka, and fatally shot at Ukrainian Orthodox priest Rostyslav Dudarenko who, volunteering at the village checkpoint, had raised a cross and was approaching the convoy urging them to be peaceful and retreat.[13] The same month, Dean Vitaly Volodymyrovich Vinogradov was attempting to trek ten miles to Kyiv and fleeing occupation forces in Bucha but was shot dead by Russian troops, his body left on a street to be identified an entire month later.[14] In November 2022, four days after the abduction of Ukrainian Evangelical pastor Anatoliy Prokopchuk and his 19-year-old son O. by Russian soldiers, the deceased bodies of the two men were discovered in a forest near Kherson and exhibited "sings of prolonged and excruciating torture".[15] In December 2022, Russian troops abducted two Greek Catholic priests, Father Ivan Levytskyi and Father Bohdan Heleta, after the two men were framed by soldiers who planted munitions in their church and accused them of working with Ukrainian forces; Fathers Levytskyi and Heleta remain in Russian custody over a year later and are reportedly being tortured.[16]

Noteworthy incidents: 2023

In May 2023, Russian forces captured Ukrainian Orthodox Church Father Kostiantyn Maksimov as he tried to cross into Crimea, and no news has since been reported on his status.[17] In September 2023, a court in the Russian-occupied Ukrainian region of Donetsk convicted Orthodox Father Khristofor Khrimli and Father Andri Chui with fines and deportation orders on the accusations that they had violated Russian laws prohibiting missionary activity by engaging in evangelism, and that they had allegedly been "inciting hatred and discord on an ethnic and religious basis". The sentencing is speculated to be retaliation for the two men's refusal to abandon the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and join the Russian Orthodox Church, and for offering prayers and support to their communities.[18]

Conclusion & Recommendation(s)

Jubilee Campaign urges the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine to:

1. Extend its mandate - soon to expire in April 2024 - to continue collecting and preserving evidence of potential war atrocities and crimes against humanity.

Jubilee Campaign urges member and observer states of the Human Rights Council to:

1. Level stronger, coordinated, multilateral sanctions upon the Russian Federation to cripple its financial and technological base propping up its incursion into Ukraine;

2. Continue providing financial and humanitarian support to all communities in Ukraine, including those who remain in their homes, those who have been internally displaced, and those who have had to flee the nation into neighboring countries;
3. Offer assistance in rebuilding cultural and religious sites, including churches and temples, and other related buildings which have operated as shelters for civilians and which can operate as regional aid distributors.

[1] Institute for Religious Freedom [Ukraine], “Almost 500 religious sites were destroyed in Ukraine as a result of Russian aggression”, 2 March 2023.

[2] George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Thomas Bergeron, Daniel Mealie, Will Kielm, & Mitchell Belcher, “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 9, 2023”, Institute for the Study of War, 9 April 2023.

[3] Release International, “Ukraine: Occupying forces close churches, arrest pastors”, 12 October 2022.

[4] Institute for the Study of War, Ukraine Conflict Updates 2023: This page is a collection of ISW and CTP’s Ukraine war updates from 2023.

[5] Katherine Lawton & Will Stewart, “Russia ‘bombs church’ in Ukraine on Orthodox Easter Sunday as Putin and huge security team join worshippers at service in Moscow led by top bishop ally of the president”, Daily Mail, 16 April 2023.

[6] Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Nicole Wolkov, & Frederick W. Kagan, “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, 16 May 2023”, Institute for the Study of War, 16 May 2023.

[7] State Service of Ukraine for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience, “Address of the State Service of Ukraine on Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience”, 23 July 2023. ; Hanna Arhirova, “Russian shelling hits a landmark church in the Ukrainian city of Kherson”, Associated Press, 3 August 2023.

[8] Regina Gimalova, “A police department instead of a church: How the Russian army persecutes clergy and destroys churches”, Verstka, 6 July 2023.

[9] Aleteia Premium, “Breaking: Russian soldiers kill Ukrainian priest in Kyiv region”, 28 February 2022.

[10] Supra note 12.

[11] Supra note 12.

[12] Supra note 12.

[13] Emily Bontrager, “Ukrainian Orthodox Priest Shot at Checkpoint”, For the Martyrs, 31 March 2022.

[14] The Alabama Baptist, “Ukrainian seminary professor killed while trying to walk to safety, friend says”, 7 April 2022.

[15] Release International, “Ukraine: Evangelical leader and son tortured and killed by Russian forces”, 30 October 2022.

[16] Courtney Mares, “Ukrainian archbishop appeals for release of Catholic priests captured by Russian troops”, Catholic News Agency, 2 December 2022. ; Felix Corley, “OCCUPIED UKRAINE: Zaporizhzhia priests still ‘disappeared’, 4 Churches banned”, Forum 18, 20 December 2023.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Felix Corley, “OCCUPIED UKRAINE: Detained, fined, ordered ‘deported’”, Forum 18, 24 October 2023.