

**Briefing to the  
United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe  
(Helsinki Commission)  
on “Cyprus’ Religious Cultural Heritage in Peril”  
(July 21, 2009)  
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I too would like to thank the Helsinki Commission for inviting me to testify on an issue which I believe is of great importance. Your decision to hold this Briefing clearly indicates the seriousness and concern of the issue under discussion. Yesterday in fact, marked 35 years since the Turkish invasion and occupation of Cyprus which forcibly separated Greek and Turkish Cypriots along ethnic lines and resulted in the destruction and desecration of Cyprus’ religious cultural heritage in the occupied area.

In April 2003, the Turkish forces partially lifted the restrictions imposed on crossings to and from the occupied area. This was the first time, since 1974, that it was possible for Greek Cypriots to visit there. At that time I was teaching at the University of Cyprus as Visiting Professor of Medieval (Byzantine) Art, Architecture and Archaeology. In cooperation with the non-governmental Kykkos-Museum, I recruited a team of experts and proceeded to the detailed examination and photographic documentation of every accessible religious monument in the occupied area. I also sought to describe the state of conservation of the buildings, mural/mosaic decoration and movable property. Today, the project is completed -after I was arrested twice by the Turkish Military Police- and I can report to you that we possess a data base of approximately 20.000 photographs, as well as a collection of photographic and archive material of the monuments before 1974. A comparison of the monuments before and after the Turkish invasion easily shows the scope of destruction and desecration.

Around 500 churches and religious sites belonging to the Greek-Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Cyprus, the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the Holy Monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai, the Roman Catholic Church, the Catholic-Armenian Church, the Catholic-Maronite Church, the Jewish community, as well as the Protestant Church, along with their cemeteries have been willfully desecrated, pillaged, looted and destroyed. Furthermore, a considerable number of Christian churches have been converted into military camps, mosques, stables, hencoops, ox- and sheep-stalls. In addition, some are being used today as wheat-chambers, storerooms and granaries, while a number were rented or sold to private individuals, who use them as art-studios, carpentry-workshops, parking-stations, coffee-shops, residences, cultural-centers, gym-centers, ceramic-workshops, hotels, pubs, theaters, nightclubs, museums, ottoman baths (hamam), sport-clubs and dancing schools. The church of the Savior in the Chrysiliou-village is used today as a mortuary.

UNESCO Report 25 of December 1984 states that “The Republic of Cyprus had repeatedly applied to UNESCO and asked the mission of observers to report on the

condition of the monuments. So far, the mission has met with the refusal of the Turkish occupation regime. Similarly, the Council of Europe, after restricted inspection of some occupied churches, highlighted in a 1989 Report the severe condition of the buildings and requested their immediate conservation. The Church of Cyprus and the Government, as well as societies, institutions, foundations, church committees and individuals have tried unsuccessfully to get permission to restore, repair and maintain their churches. The Archbishop of Cyprus proposed repeatedly to fund any needed restoration of Muslim religious places in the south in addition to the funds provided by the Government. A mutual reaction regarding the permission of similar restoration of the Christian monuments in the north never came. Also, a Commission of the Church of Cyprus for the Religious Heritage in Cyprus, was founded in 2008, where I am taking part as an expert, but there was again no response from the Turkish side. Similarly, the Declaration of the European Parliament on September 5, 2006 on the Obligation of Protection and Conservation of the Religious Heritage in the occupied area of Cyprus, along with funding amounting to €500.000 for that purpose, met again with the Turkish refusal. The direct responsibility of Turkey concerning the occupied area is clearly stated in the decision of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in the Fourth Interstate Application of Cyprus against Turkey (- ECHR, May 10, 2001). In its decision the European Court of Human Rights stated, inter alia, that Turkey *“having effective overall control over northern Cyprus, its responsibility can not be confined to the acts of its own soldiers or officials in northern Cyprus but must also be engaged by virtue of the acts of the local administration, which survives by virtue of Turkish military and other support”*.

The movable property of almost every church was looted, most of their mural/mosaic decorations was stripped away and a considerable number were located in international art markets abroad. Some well-known legal cases, as the Kanakaria-case (Indianapolis Court), the Antiphonitis-Case (Rotterdam Court), the Dikmen-case (Munich Court), as well as the published study of Ms. Jansen demonstrate and prove the involvement and activity of Turkish looters in the occupied areas. Furthermore, cases as the stripped away 13<sup>th</sup> c. frescoes of the Lysi chapel (now in Houston, USA) and icons of the Koutzoventis monastery demonstrate, in the most obvious way, the co-operation and involvement of the Turkish armed forces in the illicit trade. Both, the above mentioned churches were situated in areas under the direct control of the Turkish military and their icons and frescoes were located in the USA, Germany and Holland.

There is no religious freedom in the Turkish occupied areas of Cyprus for non Muslims since all the communities I referred to earlier are either not free or severely restricted in the exercise of religious services, praying and maintaining the graves of their ancestors. They do not have the right of staying in their monasteries or convents, nor the right to have free religious elections, ordination of priests, building or repairing their churches, or administrate their religious property. Even in the cases of a handful of churches operating in the occupied eastern Karpass peninsula where the remaining Greek Cypriot enclaved are, the illegal regime confiscated icons and still collects all donations and offerings of the pilgrims, who since 2003 can only visit these churches. The clergy and particularly the bishops are not allowed to hold services, a fact proven also by the two-three exceptions, after the intervention mainly of the US Embassy in Nicosia and UNFICYP.

Even four days ago on July 17<sup>th</sup>, after repeated intervention of UNFICYP, permission was granted only to Greek Cypriot refugees of the occupied village of Kythrea to hold a service in their desecrated church but only for 50 persons and one priest, whose names had to be sent in advance and approved by the illegal regime and only under the presence and surveillance of the Turkish military. Bishops, as the Metropolitans of Carpasia, Famagusta, Tamasos, Kykkos, or the Armenian Archbishop, have been repeatedly prevented by the Turkish Army from holding religious services in occupied churches, although they had previously received permission from the illegal regime through UNFICYP. Therefore I was surprised to read the 2008 International Religious Freedom Report of the US Department of State that “*However, the politically divisive environment on Cyprus engendered some restrictions on religious freedom, particularly for Greek Cypriots, Armenians and Maronites*”. *The Report added that “the Turkish Cypriot Authorities generally respected religious freedom in practice*”. This blatantly ignores the inaccessibility for religious services to both the Greek-Orthodox churches and to the other faiths that I had mentioned above, including a Jewish cemetery and synagogue situated in the Turkish military camp of Margo, near Lapithos.

The religious culture of the northern part of the island is changing because of the importation of over 160,000 mainland Turkish settlers who are overwhelmingly more conservative than the Turkish Cypriots.

This is the reality of the situation in the Turkish occupied area. In total contrast, the Government of the Republic of Cyprus, through the Turkish Cypriot Properties Management Service and the Department of Antiquities, repairs and maintains mosques and Muslim places of Worship in the Government controlled area, 17 of which, have been declared as “ancient monuments”, allowing the free exercise of their religious services.

Though a Technical Committee composed of members of both communities was established a year ago, in the framework of the current negotiations for a Cyprus solution, to work jointly on restoration and preservation issues, there have been no tangible results to date. On the contrary, during this period, the 18th century church of St. Catherine in the occupied village of Gerani was demolished.

Allow me to thank you again for your invitation, to speak on the religious cultural heritage of Cyprus in peril and I am at your disposal for any questions on the issue.