



HELSINKI COMMISSION BRIEFING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

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Chairman - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Today's Helsinki Commission briefing on "Cyprus' Religious Cultural Heritage in Peril" is part of the Commission's ongoing work to assess implementation of OSCE commitments by the participating States. Indeed, the legacy of the July 20, 1974 invasion of Cyprus by Turkey and its ongoing occupation of that island nation is evident in many areas. This afternoon we focus on one aspect, the destruction of religious cultural heritage in the northern part of the country.

In the aftermath of Turkey's 1974 military invasion and ongoing occupation of the northern part of Cyprus, a precious piece of the country's cultural heritage is at risk of collapse – Orthodox churches, chapels and monasteries as well as those of other Christian communities. According to Archbishop Chrysostomos II, over 500 religious sites in the area have been seriously damaged or destroyed. Some have been converted into mosques, while others are being used as stables, shops, hotels or night clubs. Many have been left to the ravages of time and the elements. The Church of Cyprus recently announced plans to file a formal case with the European Court of Human Rights regarding its religious sites and other property in the occupied area.

In addition to relevant OSCE commitments, there are a number of other international instruments that deserve mention, including the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property During Armed Conflict and its Protocols; the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property; and the 1995 Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects.

Thousands of icons, sacred vessels, vestments, manuscripts, frescos, and mosaics have been looted from sites in northern Cyprus. Many stolen icons and other antiquities are placed on the auction block for sale on the international market, some making their way into U.S. collections. An exhibit currently on display at the Byzantine Museum, in Nicosia, is entitled "Hostages in Germany: The Plundered Ecclesiastical Treasures of the Turkish-occupied Cyprus." In a recent case, two icons from the early 1600s taken from a church in the northern village of Trikomo, were seized in Zurich by Swiss police.

As chairman of the Helsinki Commission, I call upon Turkey to adhere to its OSCE commitments and international obligations with respect to religious and other aspects of the cultural heritage in northern Cyprus, an area under its effective control. I urge the authorities in

Ankara to enhance their cooperation in efforts to prevent the illicit international trafficking in objects of religious origin and other cultural property and to facilitate the restitution of illicitly exported cultural property.