



HELSINKI COMMISSION BRIEFING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Christopher H. Smith

Ranking Minority Member - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Thank you, and welcome to our briefers today.

I appreciate this timely briefing on the threats to the rich religious and cultural heritage of the Turkish-occupied area of northern Cyprus. In the early 1970s, before the Turkish invasion, there were over 500 churches, chapels and monasteries in this area. Only a handful remain intact, with the others in various stages of deterioration. Virtually all of these sacred sites, including cemeteries, have been desecrated. Icons have been ripped from sanctuaries, frescoes have been effaced, and bells, altars, manuscripts, and other sacred objects carted off.

For most of the past thirty-five years, this area was cut off from the rest of the island, and this pillaging and destruction has occurred in an area tightly controlled and monitored by tens of thousands of Turkish troops. In fact, the effacement of the Greek Cypriot religious and cultural heritage in the occupied area is tolerated and at times even encouraged by the Turkish government in order to erase vestiges of Greek Cypriot presence in that part of Cyprus—it is nothing less than a cultural form of ethnic cleansing.

In our secular society, some might shrug their shoulders at the damage to this or that monument of religious architecture. But the damage goes much deeper than mortar and stone; it touches the identity and life of the Greek Cypriot people. In Cypriot towns and villages life's milestones--birth, marriage, and death--were all celebrated and marked in churches, chapels, and monasteries. The history and memory of the Greek Cypriot people is bound up with these sacred sites. But under the Turkish occupation, not even the dead have been allowed to rest in peace--in many church yards and nearby cemeteries crosses have been smashed off gravestones.

Mr. Chairman, the Turkish government, notwithstanding its OSCE commitments to protect and preserve religious and cultural heritage sites, has tolerated and connived at the destruction and pillaging of sacred sites in the area it has occupied. I look forward to the testimony of the experts appearing today on what can be done to save what remains of northern Cyprus' rich cultural heritage--before it is too late.