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RUSSIA: 500 religious buildings damaged and over 20 clerics murdered in Ukr.

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Hearing about Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its implications for religious freedom

HRWF (20.03.2023) – Since Russian President Vladimir Putin launched the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Russian forces have committed numerous

religious freedom and other related human rights violations in Ukraine, including the killing and torture of religious leaders and the destruction of countless houses of worship.

This is the general topic that was addressed by USCIRF (*), the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and its guest speakers at the hearing it organized on March 15 from Washington to discuss **Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for Religious Freedom.**

Russian officials have turned to antisemitic rhetoric and Holocaust distortion in order to try to justify the country's groundless invasion. In the areas of Ukraine that Russia has occupied since 2014, its de facto authorities and proxies have imposed draconian laws to suppress religious communities such as the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, predominantly Muslim Crimean Tatars and Jehovah's Witnesses. Meanwhile, in Russia, the state has continued to prosecute an ever-growing list of religious groups as so-called "extremists" for their peaceful religious activities and launched a ruthless campaign to silence civil society and independent media.

USCIRF Chair **Nury Turkel** opened the hearing. In a video message Republican Senator **Roger Wicker** urged holding Russian President Putin accountable as he is one of the worst international violators of religious freedom, he stressed. Putin wants to go back to the old Soviet empire and has used religious nationalism to advance his cause, framing the war in these terms, he noted.

Dmytro Vovk, Visiting Associate Professor at Cardozo School of

Law and member of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)'s Panel of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief said that murders, torture, forced detention, acts of vandalism, and social hatred directed by the Russian forces are part of the everyday reality in the territories occupied by Russian forces. Since the invasion started, the Russian military has damaged 500 religious buildings, and over twenty religious figures have been murdered.

With Russia engaging aggressively in the newly occupied territories, Vovk urged to keep monitoring the situation by focusing on freedom of religious violations. This will help to raise global awareness, he said. Vovk recommended sanctioning those responsible, including the Moscow Patriarch, and urged facilitating legal support to the Ukrainian government regarding national security and religious issues. There should be restrictions against those religious leaders who support the war. The US government should support those leaders who are against the war, he stressed.

Rachel Denber, Deputy Director of the Europe and Central Asia Division at Human Rights Watch said that throughout the past decades the Kremlin has been trying to decimate a robust civil society in Russia, in a step-by-step repression. In this process, the authorities have abused Russia's extremism laws in order to persecute religious minorities. "The authorities are suspicious of any institution that they don't control", stressed Denber. They have continued to push traditional values and demonized anything they perceive as a threat.

The panel also heard from **Dennis Christensen**, a former religious prisoner of conscience and the first Jehovah's

Witness to be convicted and imprisoned in Russia after its Supreme Court in 2017 labeled Jehovah's Witnesses "extremist" and banned their activities. Christensen was arrested in May 2017 during a worship service and sentenced to six years in prison for "organizing the activities of an extremist organization." On May 24, 2022, Christensen was released after serving his sentence and subsequently deported to his homeland, Denmark. In the hearing, he spoke of the Russian prison system as he experienced it for years throughout his detention. "Constant violations of religious freedom continue, it goes on and it is getting worse and worse", he added.

A Crimean Tatar's testimony was read out during the hearing, as he or she could not be present for fear of retribution. Since the 2014 Crimean occupation, Russia has used a variety of methods, including enforced disappearance of activists, convictions, in order to repress the Tatar community. The authorities imposed the mandatory re-registration of religious organizations in line with Russian laws, and the occupying forces also often dismissed applications for re-registration. There were 2200 religious organizations in the region before 2016, fewer than 800 remain after the occupation. The occupying authorities have used legislation to combat terror and anti-extremism to persecute religious groups, forcing Crimean Tatars that opposed the occupation to yield and accept the situation. This sent a message that no one is safe.

In the words of Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, President of the Conference of European Rabbis and Exiled Chief Rabbi of Moscow, the Jewish community in Russia is a community in distress. Under Putin the political system has become more and more authoritarian, and since the unprovoked war against Ukraine even semi-totalitarian. "War is a catastrophe for the Jewish community in both countries", he said. But feelings of

anti-Semitism are not grass root, but top down, government-led. Since the beginning of the war 30% left. Yet, not everyone can leave, Chief Rabbi noted, worried about the state of the Jewish community.

The panelists agreed that for the religious communities in Russia the situation can still get a lot worse. The West should therefore do much more to support the opposition, because they can bring change to the country. Ukraine remains the main victim of Russian aggression, but the West must also support other countries in the region, such as the Baltics or Poland, in order to prevent further aggression.

() USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan US federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF uses international standards to monitor violations of religious freedom or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.*

More reading

Mapping dated 26 March 2022: <https://bit.ly/42ml6gv>

Mapping dated 3 February 2023: <https://bit.ly/3JNgqZH>

Christianity Today: <https://bit.ly/3LI3eque>

World Council of Churches: <https://bit.ly/3Fzw604>

Photo: Mother of God Joy of All Who Sorrow Orthodox Church in

the village Bohorodychne, Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine. The village came under attack by Russian forces in June 2022. Photo: Volodymyr Kutsenko

[Further reading about FORB in Russia on HRWF website](#)

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