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Christianity has long established roots in Cyprus - In 45 AD the Apostles Paul, Barnabas and Mark travelled to the island and preached the Gospel.

- Christianity in Cyprus covers a range of denominations:
 - Orthodox – 80%
 - Maronites, Armenians and Roman Catholics– 2%
- In addition to this 18% of the island is Muslim

Christians and Muslims have lived peacefully side by side throughout Cyprus' history under all rulers - for example, Venetians, Ottomans and as a British Colony. When Cyprus was granted Independence in 1960, religious freedom was enshrined in the constitution. This, unfortunately came to an end when Turkey illegally invaded the island in 1974 and to this day continues to occupy 37% of the island in the north. Immediately following the invasion, the then Leader of the Turkish Cypriot community, Rauf Denktash, re-affirmed that Orthodox Christians living in the northern part of the island were free to remain and their religious rights would be protected. However, since 1975 Mr Denktash's words have not been reflected in events and Turkey has begun a systematic effort to remove and destroy the Christian religious heritage of the occupied northern part of Cyprus. There is a big difference between Muslims who freely moved to the north after 1974 (on encouragement from Turkey) and Christians who were forcibly removed from the northern part of the island. Today, Muslims in the free areas of the Republic of Cyprus are free to practise their religion in stark contrast to the Christians in the north. Enclaved Orthodox communities remain to this day in the north, but here are various methods by which religious destruction has taken place impacting on these communities and those Christians who have had to leave, including amongst others:

- Churches have been intentionally neglected and allowed to fall into disrepair, they have been sold to Turkish residents or European citizens who use them as commercial offices, private museums, or shops. For example, the monastery of Saint Anastasia, located in the occupied village of Lapithos has even been converted into a hotel
- 77 churches have been converted into mosques and inscriptions from the Quran are now where icons and paintings used to be
- 28 Churches and religious sites cannot be accessed as they are used by the Turkish military
- Churches are, intentionally, being left to fall into disrepair. For example, just in February 2019, Turkish forces refused access to renovation teams funded by the Church of Cyprus to repair parts of "St Iacovos ", an 800 year old church, in the buffer zone which is controlled by Turkey
- A number of cemeteries have also been destroyed and orthodox Christians who have been forced to leave their homes can't even access them to visit graves of loved ones. One of the few Latin Catholic cemeteries, in the UN buffer zone, is only accessible once a year.
- Over 60,000 icons have been looted and some have been discovered sold overseas.
- 144 requests for services in occupied northern Cyprus, between 2015-17 were denied or restricted and services are often disrupted. Denial and disruption of services still continues
- To this day 829 Orthodox individuals are still missing from the time of the invasion, denied the right to a proper burial and Turkey won't share information of where the remains are.

The European Parliament and US House of Representatives have clearly and publically blamed and condemned Turkey for the destruction of Cyprus' religious heritage and called for the cessation on all restrictions on freedom of religion for the enclaved Cypriots, although sadly in practice not much

has changed. Apart from some support from 2 MPs here in the UK there is not the same outcry from either Parliament or the Government.

Recommendations:

- The FCO should take a much clearer, public and vocal position against the various forms of Christian persecution that are happening in the occupied areas of Cyprus. No other country has the strength and depth of relationship and obligation that the UK has with Cyprus (as a Guarantor Power of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Cyprus, the former colonial ruler & with two Sovereign Bases on the island). Therefore, the lack of public condemnation of Turkey is especially disappointing and upsetting to Cypriots in the UK and Cyprus.
- They should publically call for the immediate restoration of churches and graveyards in occupied Cyprus, as a confidence building measure, independent of reunification negotiations
- Prohibit the importing of looted icons and the UK should sign and ratify the 2017 Council of Europe Convention on Offences relating to Cultural Property
- Use its influence with the Government of Turkey privately to reinforce that the freedom to worship is an unqualified right and must be respected and publically condemn any attempts to disrupt that freedom
- Use international diplomacy with Turkey to pressure them to release information on the missing persons so that their relatives can have a religious burial

Q&A

Do you see the treatment against Christians in the north as discriminatory behaviour or persecution?

Persecution since it is an attempt to actively drive out the Christian Community and expunge any heritage from this area of Cyprus

Has anyone tried to raise these issues in Turkey, at the UN's Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review for example?

The Council of Europe (of which Turkey is a member) has raised and passed motions against Turkey. The Republic of Cyprus also continues to raise it in various international forums, primarily the UN in New York and Geneva, as well as in ad hoc meetings when specific incidents occur (e.g. requests for religious services are declined) through either the Foreign Ministry or office of the Presidential Commissioner.

Have you or anyone you are aware of ever raised the issue with the High Commission in Cyprus?

Yes, it has been raised with the UK High Commissioner and the matter discussed with him and predecessors. It could be that privately issues are being raised, although no public statements of support have been made, unlike the US House of Representatives and US State Department annual Report on religious Freedom in Cyprus, although it is unclear if there has been any "on the ground" effect in response.