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ПОСТОЯННОЕ ПРЕДСТАВИТЕЛЬСТВО
РОССИЙСКОЙ ФЕДЕРАЦИИ
ПРИ ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ПО БЕЗОПАСНОСТИ
И СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВУ В ЕВРОПЕ

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**Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks
at the Security of Christians
in the Middle East and Beyond conference
organised by foreign ministers of Russia and Hungary
on the sidelines of the OSCE Ministerial Council meeting**

Vienna, December 7, 2017

Mr Moderator,

I fully share the welcome address to all those who have accepted our invitation. I am particularly grateful to our colleagues – foreign ministries' heads. My Hungarian counterpart Péter Szijjártó and I decided to draw your attention to a serious problem related to the infringement of the rights of Christians in OSCE member countries and adjacent regions.

Nowadays, it is obvious to all that Christians are encountering numerous problems in various parts of the world. Their situation in the Middle East remains especially deplorable, even though, as Russian President Vladimir Putin noted recently at a Moscow meeting with the heads of local Orthodox churches, it is the cradle of Christianity.

As a result of the irresponsible policy of several Western countries aimed at regime change in the region, vast territories in the Middle East have turned into a zone of chaos and instability and have become breeding grounds for terrorism and extremism, as well as a source of illegal migration. Believers and members of the clergy are attacked, persecuted and killed by terrorist groups, fall victim to discriminatory laws and law enforcement practice and have to flee their homes. Desecration and destruction of Christian shrines with impunity is not a rare occurrence. The mass exodus of Christians upsets the established ethnic and religious balance in the region that has evolved over centuries. I completely subscribe to what Mr Szijjártó has just said regarding the need to do everything to ensure that Christians return to the places where their predecessors have lived for centuries. At the aforementioned meeting, President Putin said that a working group created by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church could play an important role in facilitating the return of Christians to the region. I discussed this matter today at a bilateral meeting with Archbishop Paul Gallagher.

We believe that the OSCE should take a principled position on the discrimination of Christians in the Middle East and uphold their rights more effectively. There is a need for a productive dialogue between the OSCE and its Mediterranean partners – Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. As I said, we support the Italian presidency's plans to institute the post of special representative of the OSCE acting presidency for migration and Mediterranean affairs.

Naturally, it is essential to foster the peaceful resolution of crises and conflicts after which real return [of Christians] can be ensured. However, unfortunately, the region still

abounds in such conflicts. Countries in the region need assistance in consolidating or restoring the institutions of power, as well as socio-economic rehabilitation and actively fighting terrorism. All of this will have a positive impact on the situation of Christians and provide conditions for their repatriation.

There are also glaring problems in several EU member countries, where Christian roots are being effectively abandoned. Pushing Christian traditions and symbols to the sidelines of the public space erodes European cultural and civilisational identity. Desecration of Christian values under the cover of freedom of expression and the imposition of the ultraliberal perception of “secularism,” when it turns from the principle of the separation of the church and the state into the fight against religion verging on militant atheism, are disturbing.

The harassment of the canonical Orthodox Church in Ukraine is acquiring alarming proportions. The desecration and seizure of church buildings by extremists and violence against members of the clergy and believers are compounded by the attempts of the authorities to enshrine in law their “right” to interfere in religious affairs and impose restrictions on the activity of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

It should be noted that representatives of other traditional religions are also subjected to discrimination and harassment in Europe. It is unacceptable to equate Islam with terrorism or to insult believers’ feelings, let alone do so publicly in articles and cartoons. Proliferating manifestations of anti-Semitism and attempts to glorify Nazis and their minions responsible for Holocaust-related crimes also cause concern.

We consider it necessary to reinforce OSCE leverage in ensuring religious tolerance. At the 2014 ministerial meeting in Basel, we adopted a declaration on countering anti-Semitism and decided to frame similar declarations in defence of Christians and Muslims, committing that to paper. Unfortunately, a consensus could not be reached either in Belgrade in 2015 or in Hamburg in 2016 or here in Vienna due to the politicised position of certain states that view such documents – on which we all agreed – as not politically correct. We hope that the future Italian presidency will manage to solve this task and in this way we will honour the obligations that we assumed three years ago.

At this point we urge OSCE institutions to become more actively involved in upholding the Christians’ rights. We propose that the OSCE programme for next year include a separate conference on this issue. We expect the presidency’s personal representatives to raise their profiles regarding various aspects of tolerance.

We see no conflict between protecting believers and human rights. That said, we cannot abide a situation where human rights are used as a pretext for attempts to revise the fundamental norms of morality and integrity and impose approaches that are at odds with Christian and other religious tenets. This path is not only destructive for society but also anti-democratic, since it is often pursued contrary to the will of the majority.

In the past three years, together with our colleagues from the Vatican, Lebanon, Armenia and Hungary, we have conducted regular activities in defence of Christians within the framework of the UN Human Rights Council. We appreciate the value of our Hungarian colleagues’ initiative to get the OSCE involved in this important work and focus the member countries’ attention on the need to do something, not just complain about the situation prevailing now.

I am sure that the OSCE has everything that is required to promote traditional moral ideals common to the world’s main religions and cultures and to prevent inter-civilisational and inter-religious rifts. I believe that it is essential to use these opportunities actively and correctly.

Thank you.