

May 16, 2011

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
U.S. Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Madam Secretary:

The nationwide membership of the American Hellenic Institute (AHI), an independent non-profit Greek American public policy center, strongly condemns the demolition of the Chapel of Saint Thekla, a 200-year-old Orthodox Christian church located in the village of Vokolida in Turkish-occupied Cyprus, on May 2, 2011, as reported in a statement issued May 12, 2011 by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

For nearly 37 years, the people of Cyprus have endured an illegal occupation and massive violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms by Turkey, an ally of the United States. Turkey is a signatory to a host of international treaties intended to safeguard religious freedom. This blatant violation of religious freedom under the illegal Turkish Cypriot regime supported by illegal Turkish troops reconfirms Turkey's disregard of those treaties. Furthermore, this deplorable act is one of many reasons why Turkey remains on the U.S. Commission on International Freedom's "Watch List" for a third year in row (from 2009 to 2011).

Even more disconcerting is the fact that the USCIRF statement also cites instances where the illegal Turkish Cypriot regime prohibited a bishop from performing an Easter liturgy and continues to require religious leaders to submit applications in order to be given permission to perform Divine Liturgies. According to the USCIRF:

"As recently as April 2011, the Bishop Christoforos of Karpasia was prohibited from administering the Easter liturgy at the Holy Temple of Saint Synesios in Rizokarpaso village. Also, the Bishop Porfyrios of Neapolis and Father Savvas Hadjionas were prohibited from celebrating the April 25th Divine Liturgy at the Holy Temple of Saint George at the Vatili village. The two bishops and the priest had submitted applications through the UN, in full accordance and in ample time, for local Turkish Cypriot authorities to review and approve their applications. However, the applications were denied without explanation."

Furthermore, these egregious violations of religious freedom come on the heels of the interruption and cancellation of Christmas Day services at Agios Synesios Church at Rizokarpaso by 'police officers' of the illegal Turkish Cypriot regime.

Secretary Clinton, all of these incidents are in violation of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 – signed into law by President Bill Clinton -- under which the president of the United States is obligated to consider imposing sanctions on any country whose government engages in or tolerates violations of religious freedom. President Barack Obama must condemn the obvious violation of basic human rights and implement the relevant provisions of the International Religious Freedom Act as they pertain to Turkey.

We look forward to your reply. Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nick Larigakis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Nick Larigakis
President