



Security Council

Seventy-eighth year

Provisional

9385th meeting

Wednesday, 26 July 2023, 10 a.m.

New York

<i>President:</i>	Mr. Kariuki	(United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)
<i>Members:</i>	Albania	Mr. Spasse
	Brazil	Mr. França Danese
	China	Mr. Geng Shuang
	Ecuador	Mrs. Sánchez Izquierdo
	France	Mr. De Rivière
	Gabon	Mrs. Ngyema Ndong
	Ghana	Ms. Oppong-Ntiri
	Japan	Mr. Hamamoto
	Malta	Mr. Camilleri
	Mozambique	Mr. Fernandes
	Russian Federation	Mr. Polyanskiy
	Switzerland	Mr. Hauri
	United Arab Emirates	Mr. Abushahab
	United States of America	Ms. Saha

Agenda

Threats to international peace and security

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The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

Threats to international peace and security

The President: The representative of the Russian Federation has asked for the floor on a point of order.

Mr. Polyanskiy (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): Before we begin our work, I would like to take this opportunity to voice our principled disagreement with the presidency's approach to inviting briefers to today's meeting under rule 39.

Russia requested today's meeting — and did so on 16 July — to discuss a very important and sensitive issue, which is the Kyiv regime's attacks targeting Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine. Based on the need for comprehensive consideration of the issue, we proposed three briefers. They were a representative of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, Archbishop Gideon, of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and the Ukrainian writer, publicist and civil activist Yan Taksyur, speaking on behalf of civil society. The latter two have been prosecuted in Ukraine for their political and religious views and their efforts to protect the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. They are willing to share first-hand information with the members of the Security Council based on their own experience.

We gave preliminary consent to the holding of two meetings on 26 July, one after the other, on the understanding that our briefers would be able to speak in full. However, the British presidency made the unilateral decision that there was no room for one of those briefers at a Security Council meeting, citing time constraints. I want to emphasize that this is completely artificially induced, since it was the British presidency's own decision to hold the meetings consecutively rather than moving the second to another time.

On that false pretext, the British presidency's censorship steamrolled an Orthodox cleric, Archbishop Gideon, who was similarly persecuted after he spoke before Council members the previous time. He was banned from entering the countries of the European Union, which incidentally proclaims itself to be a champion of freedom of speech and belief. And now attempts are being made to prevent the Archbishop from participating in discussions in the Council altogether. That is despite the fact that at the beginning of its watch

the British presidency announced its commitment to protecting representatives of civil society as a vital aspect of its working methods. The British delegation must be aware that earlier in July we sent a letter to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council detailing the problems that Archbishop Gideon encountered as a result of his previous briefing to the Security Council. So where is the presidency's commitment to protecting briefers now? Or does it extend only to the representatives of biased pro-Western non-governmental organizations?

I have a question for you, Mr. President. Why are you insisting on not having an Orthodox priest participate in today's meeting on the Orthodox Church? What does London have against representatives of that faith? If representatives of, say, the Catholic or Islamic faiths are invited to participate next time, will you also refuse them on a pretext of time constraints? Please respond and then I will continue.

The President: I note the statement by the representative of the Russian delegation on a point of order and will respond to his comments.

As part of our functions in the presidency, we consulted Council members on Russia's proposed briefers, mindful of the very tight timing of the Council this morning and determined not to have to cancel any subsidiary-body business by rescheduling. On that basis, and based on the views of other Council members, we made a reasonable compromise proposal. We did not refuse either of Russia's proposed non-United Nations briefers. We offered the Russian delegation a choice of which one it wanted to speak. And we made it clear that it could send a written contribution from the other in a letter to the Council if it wanted both of their contributions to be considered.

The Russian delegation did not engage with the presidency's compromise proposal and continued to insist on its preferred line-up in full. There is nothing in the provisional rules of procedure that gives a Council member the right to unilaterally demand that. As with every presidency, we are balancing different and competing pressures — the desire to bring civil-society voices to the Council, alongside the need to maintain a workable programme that allows Council members the time for discussion.

Russia has proposed five non-United Nations briefers this month already. That is five more than have been proposed by the rest of the Council, not counting

the presidency — five more put together than the rest of the Council. We have accepted all of the rest of them so far, but the presidency's role is not to do everything that one delegation demands while ignoring the views of other Council members. To be clear, we are not objecting to a specific briefer. We simply asked that Russia limit itself to one briefer, not two, and send in a written contribution from the second. That is not unreasonable, and it is important that we maintain the policy of the presidency on the matter.

The representative of the Russian Federation has asked for the floor again on a point of order.

Mr. Polyanskiy (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): I do not recall hearing that some kind of quota had been established for invitations to civil-society representatives. Once again, I repeat, we are acting fully in line with your presidency's programme, which was proposed to us all, to which we all agreed, and which was to facilitate the greatest possible participation of representatives of civil society. Furthermore, I can remember many situations where a number of civil-society representatives participated in briefings, but not a single situation in which the presidency proposed some sort of choice as to which briefer should be nominated, as if we were haggling in a bazaar or a store.

Before our very eyes we are seeing an egregious situation in which the United Kingdom, in the chair of the President of the Security Council, is obstructing the participation in its discussions of a representative of one of the key world religions.

We cannot accept that. We request that the invitation to Bishop Gedeon be put to a procedural vote, and we ask that members vote in favour.

Furthermore, in protest against the attempts by the United Kingdom to prevent our guest from speaking at this briefing, despite the fact that he fully meets the criteria set out in rule 39 of the Council's rules of procedure, meaning that he is competent to talk about today's agenda item, we will not speak at the meeting to be held following this one. I request that the Security Council Affairs Division make the relevant changes to the list of speakers for that meeting.

The President: In view of the comments made by Council members, I propose to put to the vote the proposal by the Russian Federation, to extend an invitation to Bishop Gedeon, under rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, to provide a briefing to the Security Council under the agenda item

"Threats to international peace and security". Just to be clear, if Council members vote "yes", they are voting for the participation of Bishop Gedeon in this meeting. The presidency's recommendation is that we adhere to the presidency's proposal.

I shall now put the proposal to the vote.

A vote was taken by show of hands.

In favour:

Brazil, China, Russian Federation

Against:

None

Abstaining:

Albania, Ecuador, France, Gabon, Ghana, Japan, Malta, Mozambique, Switzerland, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, United Arab Emirates

The President: The proposal received 3 votes in favour, none against and 12 abstentions. Having failed to obtain the required number of votes, the proposal to invite Bishop Gedeon to participate in the meeting has been rejected.

The representative of the Russian Federation has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Polyanskiy (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): Today is a historic and extremely unfortunate day for the Security Council and the entire international community. We have seen the blocking of the participation of a representative of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church at this meeting. Western delegations have therefore effectively openly demonstrated solidarity with the repressive policy of the Kyiv regime targeting canonical Orthodoxy, which is a blatant example of egregious double standards undermining freedom of expression, freedom of opinion, freedom of faith and all the ideals that they proclaim to uphold. We call for the presidency of the United Kingdom to be judged in terms of its hypocrisy as one of the sponsors of the resolution on human fraternity and religious tolerance (resolution 2686 (2023)). Its decision to block our proposal through the prerogative of the Security Council presidency and to prevent the participation of an Orthodox priest is a blatant example of precisely how London really views all those lofty ideals and how easily it is ready to abandon them to advance petty parochial attempts to spite the Russian Federation. We recall the English saying, "practice what you preach".

We have lost count of the many times that London has failed to adhere to it.

The President: In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of Ukraine to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Ms. Nihal Saad, Director of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations; and Mr. Yan Taksyur, author.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I give the floor to Ms. Saad.

Ms. Saad: I would like to thank the members of the Security Council for the opportunity to brief the Council on this issue on behalf of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations.

I will focus my briefing on the freedom of religion and belief dimension and the protection of religious sites within the context of the war in Ukraine.

In the case of wars and intercommunal conflicts, saving lives and protecting human welfare is, understandably, often, if not always, a priority, while protecting places of worship, safeguarding religious sites and preserving cultural heritage sites take a second, distant place. History reminds us that war, religion and politics are intertwined in many ways. Therefore, it is important to factor in, and understand the complexity of, the role that religion plays in some of those conflicts. The ongoing and relentless war in Ukraine is a case in point. In addressing the situation holistically, we should right-size the religious dimension in that particular crisis, which we have at hand as the result of the Russian Federation's armed attack on Ukraine. The division among Ukraine's Orthodox bodies is not new. It has existed for decades, but has been exacerbated within Ukraine and reverberated worldwide, as Orthodox churches have struggled with how and whether to take sides.

Last Sunday, we woke up here to the heartbreaking images of a severely damaged historic cathedral, the largest Orthodox church in Odesa. A Russian missile hit the Transfiguration Cathedral and other historic buildings that lie in the historic heritage centre of Odesa. At the same time, it was heartening to see that, hours later, parishioners and volunteers donning hard hats, with shovels and brooms, began removing

rubble and tried to salvage any artefacts they could. The Cathedral in Odesa is not the only religious site that has been damaged in the war. According to a preliminary assessment undertaken by UNESCO, 116 religious sites have been damaged since 24 February 2022. The United Nations condemned the attack. The Secretary-General strongly condemned the Russian missile attack on Odesa and noted that the attack on an area protected under the World Heritage Convention is in violation of the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. The Director-General of UNESCO strongly condemned the attack and considered it an escalation in violence against the cultural heritage of Ukraine. The High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations condemned the attack on the Cathedral and deplored the fact that the ongoing war in Ukraine has led to the destruction or pillaging of places of worship and religious heritage sites, which has further fuelled hatred, stoked mistrust and exacerbated the hostilities.

That brings me to the United Nations Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites in unity and solidarity for safe worship, developed by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and launched by the Secretary-General in 2019. The Plan of Action is rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and grounded in the core understanding that religious sites are powerful symbols of our collective consciousness. The Plan advocates the sanctity of religious sites and the safety of worshippers and stresses the right of all believers to access their holy sites and to practice their religious rituals and traditions freely, peacefully and safely, without fear or intimidation. The Russian Federation was among a core group of Member States and other relevant stakeholders that informed the Plan of Action in its consultative phase.

The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations promotes the universality of religious sites emanating from our conviction that places of worship and sacred religious sites are representative of the history, identity and traditions of people in every country and community and must be fully respected and protected. An attack on places of worship strikes the very core of communities' sense of identity and belonging. Therefore, religious sites should be places of worship, not places of war.

Under the Charter of the United Nations, Member States pledge their commitment to promoting and encouraging universal respect for and observance of all human rights and fundamental freedoms without

distinction, including freedom of religion or belief. A number of multilateral instruments recognize that discrimination against persons on a basis of religion or belief constitutes an affront to human dignity and undermines the fundamental freedoms proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and enunciated in detail in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It is therefore the obligation of Member States to prohibit discrimination and violence on a basis of religion or belief and to implement measures to guarantee equal and effective protection under the law. In that context, the politicization of religion in the context of the war in Ukraine fuels intercommunal tensions, stokes fear and triggers violence.

Restrictions on freedom of religion and the safety of members of religious communities across Ukraine, both in territory controlled by the Government and territory controlled by the occupying Russian Federation, are matters of grave concern. According to the updated report for the period between 1 February and 30 April of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, based on the work of the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, the number of incidents of violence against members and supporters of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church increased in the reporting period. In particular, authorities searched places of worship and other facilities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, issued notices of suspicions about clergymen and placed several of them, including one of the Church's main hierarchs, under house arrest, based on little or no evidence.

In addition, a rental agreement of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the State-owned Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra with the Ministry of Culture was terminated early. However, following advocacy by the United Nations, authorities refrained from taking actions that risked violence and did not forcibly evict the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Lavra on 29 March, the stated deadline for leaving the premises. Besides that, several city and regional councils banned the activities of the Church during April. Many local councils also sought to terminate municipal property rental agreements with the Church. We are therefore concerned about the possibility that the cumulative impact of Government actions targeting the Ukrainian Orthodox Church could be discriminatory.

Another worrisome sign is the surge in hate speech and several incidents of violence against Ukrainian

Orthodox Church members in April. According to the report, public officials, bloggers and opinion leaders used discriminatory and inflammatory rhetoric and openly incited violence against clergy and supporters of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The Government and law-enforcement authorities did not address the incidents of hate speech during the reporting period effectively.

In territories occupied by the Russian Federation, there is grave concern about reports by the Human Rights Monitoring Mission during the period from 1 August 2022 to 31 January 2023, documenting actions perpetrated by the Russian armed forces against religious communities, including enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, torture or other ill treatment and unlawful deportations, carried out against clergy and members of Ukrainian Greek Catholic and evangelical Christian communities. Moreover, the Russian occupation authorities raided, ransacked and closed three places of worship belonging to the Baptist community in Melitopol, reportedly on the grounds of the community's purported links with foreign intelligence services, with little or no evidence of such links.

To conclude, I want to reiterate that when people are attacked because of their religion or belief, we are all diminished. Targeting religious actors and faith communities across Ukraine is short-sighted, miscalculated and counterproductive. The role of religious leaders in maintaining solidarity across ecumenical lines is crucial to preserving the social fabric of a unified Ukraine and will be a key factor in peacebuilding, if and when the war comes to an end. The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations emphasizes the importance of respecting religious and cultural diversity, advancing intercultural and interreligious dialogue and promoting mutual respect and understanding among individuals, societies and nations. Both parties are urged to respect and uphold fundamental human rights, including freedom of religion or belief and the right to manifest and practice one's religion freely and safely. We also emphasize the importance of respecting freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association without discrimination.

The President: I thank Ms. Saad for her briefing.

I now give the floor to Mr. Taksyur.

Mr. Taksyur (*spoke in Russian*): My name is Yan Taksyur. I am a writer and a television programme host and a citizen of Ukraine. On 10 March 2022, I was arrested by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) and sent first to an SBU prison and then to a Kyiv pre-trial facility. At the end of May of this year, a court in Kyiv sentenced me to 12 years' imprisonment. However, after an exchange of Russian prisoners of war, I was given the opportunity and the honour to speak here before you today. Why has Ukrainian justice treated me — a 70-year-old person with cancer — so harshly? There is only one real reason, which is that I defended the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church in my show, poems and articles, and spoke about the repression of the Church by the Ukrainian Government and its security organs.

I want to emphasize that my personal history is only a small part of the persecution and the terror that have been unleashed against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and its adherents in the past few years. I would like to remind the Council that the Orthodox Church in the land of Ukraine was created in the tenth century, and the current Ukrainian Orthodox Church is its direct successor. However, in 2018, a number of politicians — the then President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko, the then United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople — in violation of church laws and the Ukrainian Constitution, created a new religious organization in the country, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. They then began to demand of the ancient canonical Church that it change to a new structure.

Immediately, violent actions began targeting the believers and priesthood of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church, including the seizure of churches, their illegal re-registration and threats of legal and physical reprisals. I felt compelled to speak and write openly about the situation, which constituted a violation of article 35 of the Ukrainian Constitution, according to which the State has no right to interfere in church affairs. The new wave of persecution targeting the canonical Church arose under the current President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. It intensified and escalated in particular early this year and is still going on. Hundreds of Ukrainian Orthodox churches and monasteries have been seized and violently and illegally transferred to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Ordinary worshipers have had their fingers cut off as they attempted to

protect their churches, metal rods have been driven into skulls, the blood of the priesthood and the laity shed.

Besides that, there has been an unprecedented campaign of lies launched by the media. Without any proof, bishops and ordinary priests born in Ukraine and who spent their entire lives there are being called agents of the Kremlin and accused of harbouring arms and banned literature, although there is absolutely no evidence for any of that. Metropolitan Theodosy of Cherkasy and Kanev is under house arrest. Today, in a detention centre I know well — the former Lukianivska Prison in Kyiv, located on the site of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra — Metropolitan Pavel is languishing, as is my friend Dmitry Skvortsov, a well-known Orthodox publicist. The charges brought against them have no legal basis whatsoever, which is another egregious fact.

The world-famous holy monastery of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, on the site of which there is now a prison, is also being subjected to sophisticated repression these days. The main temples of the Lavra — the Dormition Cathedral and the Refectory Church — have already been seized and handed to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The Lavra's brethren and monks have been expelled from the monastery, some of the most valuable icons and items of worship have been seized illegally and worshippers are not being granted access into the Lavra — all because they did not give into the demand to move to another religious jurisdiction.

In that regard, I draw the Security Council's attention to the fact that the Ukrainian authorities are interfering in the realm of the sacrosanct — the relationship between man and God — in which politics and geopolitics have no place. Nevertheless, the Security Service of Ukraine is still conducting, under fabricated suspicions and pretexts, operations targeting dozens, if not hundreds, of cathedrals and monasteries in Ukraine in Zakarpattia, Chernivtsi, Rivne, Volyn, Mykolayiv, Sumy, Lviv, Zhytomyr and Kherson oblasts. Metropolitan Ionathan of Tulchyn and Bratslav and Metropolitan Luke of Zaporizhzhya and Melitopol have been subjected to searches and interrogations. The victims of this moral terror include ordinary priests. I had opportunity to get to know one of them, Father Andrei Pavlenko. Under the false accusations of collaboration with foreign intelligence, he, like me, was sentenced to 12 years in prison, after being tortured.

Today, as I address the Council, the Holy Intercession Cathedral in Khmelnytskyi has already

been seized. And this is how it happened: it was stormed in April by 500 people, including so-called activists of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and with the support of local authorities and police. In July, in the city of Bila Tserkva, a group of people, who called themselves priests of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, with the support of special forces, blocked parishioners' access to the local cathedral and seized it by force. And believe me, that sad list could go on. The scenario of lawlessness taking place throughout the country is always the same, and although those figures are hidden, it all boils down to one thing: hundreds and thousands of parishes of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church have either already been forcibly transferred and placed under the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, or remain under threat of being seized and transferred.

Moreover, in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, there is a bill that would completely ban the Ukrainian Orthodox Church — this is unprecedented in the history of law — and the deputies of the Verkhovna Rada have announced their willingness to vote in favour of it. That means that the Ukrainian authorities are going to wipe off the face of the earth the Church in which millions of the country's citizens were baptized, wed and paid last respects. I think that such a situation is unacceptable. It is illegal and criminal in the face of God and people. I hope that the members of the Council, as people who respect the sacrosanct, will not fail to give their attention and protection to those who are suffering injustice in Ukraine today.

The President: I thank Mr. Taksyur for his briefing.

I shall now give the floor to those members of the Council who wish to make statements.

Mr. Polyanskiy (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Ms. Nihal Saad and Mr. Yan Taksyur for their briefings.

First of all, I would like to reiterate, as I have done before, that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church did not ask us to convene today's meeting and did not authorize us to speak on its behalf. Nor are we speaking on behalf of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church or its specific priests or parishioners. We are well aware of the conditions in which our co-religionists are living in Ukraine, and we know what kind of pressure the Zelenskyy regime is exerting on them. And we have no illusions as to the true worth of their assessments of our current efforts, which we are likely to learn about today from social networks.

Russia already drew the Security Council's attention to Kyiv's campaign to destroy canonical Orthodoxy in Ukraine during our meeting on 17 January (see S/PV.9245), at a time when the effective seizure of churches of the Ukraine Orthodox Church and the persecution and beating of priests — which had been under way since the bloody coup d'état in Kyiv in 2014 — had reached a new level, a legislative one. As Mr. Taksyur already mentioned today, on 19 January, draft law no. 8371 was introduced into Ukraine's Parliament, essentially providing for the banning of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the seizure of its churches. As far as we understand, as early as tomorrow, on 27 July, it may be put to a vote. I will set aside for now the fact that the draft law egregiously violates at least 10 articles of the Constitution of Ukraine that regulate the freedom of speech and, above all, civil liberties. It ignores the fact that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is an independent church with its own governing bodies operating under Ukrainian laws, and that it is not governed from Russia. It also ignores the fact that there have been no judicial proceedings against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and that its alleged violations of Ukrainian law have not been established in a legal procedure. There is simply no point in talking about all this, because Ukraine ceased to be a State governed by the rule of law since at least 2014. And the Kyiv regime does what it wants without regard for the law.

I urge Council members to simply think about the blatant lawlessness and violations of basic religious freedoms that is taking place before their eyes. They merely need to consider the fact that the Parliament in Kyiv is considering a legislative ban on and the seizure of property of a canonical church with a centuries-old history, to which the majority of believers in Ukraine belong. Such a cynical act is unparalleled in modern history. For example, how would our host country react if the President of the United States were to propose to Congress to ban the Catholic Church and to seize St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York on the grounds that Catholics are subordinate to Pope Francis? What if the President of the United States were to arrest one of the cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States? And what if the United Kingdom, for example, were to arrest one of the leaders of the Muslim community, or if the British Parliament was debating a bill to ban that religion in the country under the pretext that the Islamic holy sites are located in Mecca and Medina?

Is it hard for the Council to imagine such a situation? It is hard for us as well. It seems more like the plot of a fantasy movie. But unfortunately in Ukraine, this horror movie, with the collusion of the Western sponsors of the Kyiv regime, is becoming a reality before our very eyes. The Zelenskyy regime has been consistently pursuing a State policy of the destruction of canonical orthodoxy in Ukraine. The arsenal of the measures taken includes legal bans, systematic searches, the raiding of churches, the interrogation of parishioners and clergy, their arrests, physical violence and vandalism. State and pro-Government media outlets systematically publish false information discrediting the Church and its hierarchs. The Kyiv regime, without waiting for pseudo-legislative measures, decided to seize from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, the holy site of canonical orthodoxy. The vicegerent of the Lavra, Metropolitan Pavel of Vyshhorod and Chornobyl, was placed under house arrest on false charges. On 14 July 14, after around-the-clock house arrest, he was placed in a detention centre. There is a video of him that shows the tragic picture of an elderly man — a highly respected bishop of a church — being forced to remove his panagia prior to his imprisonment in a detention centre, which shook the Orthodox world. For the first time in modern history, a high-ranking bishop of a church was persecuted by a State and sent to prison for his faith. With their unique brand of cynicism, the Kyiv authorities set his bail at 33 million hryvnia, which is approximately \$1,000,000.

For comparison, I will mention another judicial decision of the Kyiv authorities. Denis Vorody, a former child educator from Chynadiiovo in Kyiv's Zakarpattia oblast, who tried to export and sell an 11-month-old baby boy for \$25,000 on the territory of a European Union country, was released on bail earlier this week, with his bail set at \$27,000. The bail was posted, so this person who caught red-handed trafficking in humans is now roaming free, and the spiritual leader of millions of believers, an elderly and ill person who needs daily care, is languishing in prison. We turn to the entire international community and all faith leaders with a call to stand up in defence of Metropolitan Pavel.

The magnitude of the persecution by the Kyiv regime of the clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, who are now being accused of crimes against the State and public security, is reminiscent of the most tragic totalitarian episodes in world history. According to a report of the Security Service of Ukraine published

in early April 2023, since 2022 the Service carried out more than 40 so-called “comprehensive counter-intelligence measures”. From October 2022 to May 2023 alone, the Service conducted approximately 100 searches in monasteries, churches and administrative buildings of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church dioceses throughout Ukraine. Nearly 250 clerics of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church were banned from entering the country; they turned out to be outcasts in their native land. With regard to clergy, including 14 bishops, there were 61 criminal cases lodged on charges of treason and inciting religious hatred, and 19 metropolitans were deprived of Ukrainian citizenship under various pretexts. In February of this year, at the proposal of the Kyiv regime, the court sentenced to seven years in prison on charges of anti-Ukrainian activities a priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, who was captured by the Kyiv security forces in the Krasno-Limansky area of the Donetsk People's Republic temporarily controlled by the regime. A total of seven clergymen were sentenced.

Here is an excerpt from the statement of Father Gedeon, to whom British censorship did not give the floor today:

“Recently, I met with clergy who arrived from Ukraine. I cannot provide details owing to safety and security concerns. They described a terrible incident in early May in eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian military personnel drove four clergymen into icy waters in an attempt to force them to renounce their faith and to declare ‘Glory to Ukraine’. None of those saints of God, may they be blessed, renounced their faith. Three drowned, and one lost consciousness and was carried away by the current. The Ukrainian military decided that he was dead and did not pull him out, but he survived and told me this story.”

This brutal targeting of Metropolitan Pavel is an attempt by Kyiv to use force to break the resistance of Orthodox Christians who are fighting for their canonical church and, above all, to break the resistance of monks of the main Orthodox sanctuary in Ukraine — the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra — whom the Kyiv authorities have forced to vacate the premises.

On 6 June 2023, the Minister of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, Oleksandr Tkachenko, demanded that the monks leave the premises within three days. They refused to comply with that criminal

order and to receive a document for the transfer of property. On 13 June, the Kyiv court cynically rejected the claim of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church against the museum-sanctuary to ensure that the monastery community was not prevented from worshiping.

On 30 June, the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine and the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra National Reserve demanded that the monks of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church leave the premises by 4 July. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church refused to comply with that illegitimate demand. There is no court decision in that regard and such instructions from the authorities were appealed at the judicial level. Nevertheless, on 4 July, a specialized commission of the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine began work to seal the area, that is, to seize the buildings of the monastery from the monks.

On 6 July, lawyer-protopriest Chekman, speaking in the interests of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, stated that representatives of the sanctuary, with the assistance of the police, broke the locks and infiltrated section 70 of the monastery. He also published photographs showing police officers at the premises, including special forces personnel, who cordoned off the premises.

As at 14 July, at least eight buildings located on the territory of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra are known to have been closed. Worshippers who are gathering to support the monks are being forcefully dispersed by the police. That has created unbearable conditions for the monks residing in the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra. With the assistance of the security forces, actions are being taken to forcibly drive them out of the monastery.

At the same time, media outlets are publishing information that the leader of the Kyiv regime is discussing with Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople the transfer of the entire Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra complex to the so-called Orthodox Church of Ukraine, a puppet structure that was created on the initiative of former President Poroshenko of Ukraine. As we have already heard today, this is a purely political, schismatic project that has been rejected by the majority of Orthodox followers in Ukraine.

Another rhetorical question arises — can a New York court seize a Catholic or Orthodox cathedral and transfer it, for example, to the Baptists? If not, then why is it that our American colleagues, who pose as universal human rights defenders, are completely silent

and unable to utter even a word with respect to the atrocities being perpetrated in Ukraine?

At the same time, we are seeing the looting of the cultural, spiritual and historic values belonging to the Ukrainian people. On 28 June, the press service of the Louvre, in Paris, announced that the museum for temporary storage and exhibit received valuable artifacts from the Kyiv Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko National Museum of Arts, including four icons of the Byzantine period. Moreover, open sources contain information about the export of treasures of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra abroad.

The tragedy of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra is just the tip of the iceberg. Throughout Ukraine war is being waged against canonical orthodoxy. At the regional level, primarily in western Ukraine, a campaign has already been launched to ban the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The relevant decisions were made in April and May 2023 in Volyn, Ivano-Frankivsk, Zhytomyr, Lviv, Rivne, Chernivtsi and Khmelnytskyi oblasts. The councils of the Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Kirovohrad, Chernivtsi, Ternopil and Rivne oblasts called on the Verkhovna Rada to ban the Ukrainian Orthodox Church throughout the country. The city councils of Brovar, Kamianets-Podilskyi, Sumy, and Chernivtsi adopted resolutions to confiscate the land of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Today the Russian Foreign Ministry website has made available a detailed report on the illegal actions of the Kyiv regime against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, its clergy and parishioners. We will make sure to circulate the content of that report in the Security Council.

The repression of the Kyiv regime also affected another holy site — the Pochaiv Lavra, in Ternopil oblast. On 5 April, the website of the Verkhovna Rada, published a draft appeal to the Government demanding the termination of the lease agreement for the monastery.

On 10 July, schismatics from the Orthodox Church of Ukraine forced their way into the grounds of the Transfiguration Cathedral in Bila Tserkva in Kyiv oblast. They cut the locks, broke down the doors, blocked the gates and prevented worshippers from entering. Those who attempted to get in for the church service were dispersed with pepper spray; some fire extinguishers were even used. The intruders were supported by the local authorities and the police. Worshippers have been

fighting them for months, trying to retain access to the Transfiguration Cathedral.

To conclude, I wish to stress that no accusations against Russia and no fabrications about the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church grant Kyiv permission to destroy canonical orthodoxy or imprison respected and elderly clergymen whose only fault is that they are defending their faith. What right does the Zelenskyy regime have to expel monks from the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, one of the holiest sites of canonical orthodoxy? Can the parliament of any other State, at the suggestion of the President of the country, adopt a law banning a church whose worshippers represent the majority of people in that country? Why is it that when this happens in Ukraine today, our Western colleagues, who have influence over the Kyiv regime, either shamefully or deliberately turn a blind eye to this act? Where are their much-vaunted values? Or are they so completely blinded by Russophobia that they willingly bless any and every crime committed by the Kyiv regime, including crimes against the freedom of religion? We hope their societies will judge this situation as it is, as their leaders themselves seem to be afraid to do so.

Ms. Saha (United States of America): I thank Director Saad for her briefing today. I will be brief, given the number of times this year Russia has already convened us to discuss this issue.

The United States takes allegations of violations of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, seriously. We expect all governments to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms. However, what we see in today's meeting is Russia cynically complaining of mistreatment of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church while it engages in systematic religious oppression in territories under its occupation.

Russia continues to mistreat members of religious minority groups in areas of Ukraine that it has occupied during its illegal war. Russia's calling for this meeting after its destruction of Odessa's historic Transfiguration Cathedral, which belongs to the very Ukrainian Orthodox Church the Russian Government claims to be defending today, is appalling. Russia's damage to religious sites and places of worship in Ukraine is well documented. Ukraine's Institute for Religious Freedom has reported that, in Russia's unconscionable war, 494 sites in Ukraine have been destroyed, damaged or looted.

We urge the Kremlin to cease its senseless war and respect the human rights of all and the safety of Ukraine's civilian population, including members of all religious communities.

Mr. Hamamoto (Japan): I thank the briefers for their briefings.

Freedom of religion or belief is an indispensable and universal principle shared across the global community. In the international community, we have witnessed countless human rights violations that undermine the foundation of peoples' lives and societies as a whole. We stand ready to discuss human rights issues affecting international peace and security.

Russia is attempting to employ narratives to paint itself as a guardian of religious freedom. However, when it comes to attacks on religious facilities, Russia has inflicted tremendous damage on Ukraine.

We strongly condemn Russia's recent missile attacks on Odesa that resulted in civilian casualties and damaged the UNESCO-protected cathedral. After all, the absence of peace and stability undermines the freedom of religion.

Let me repeat in the strongest possible terms that Russia must withdraw all of its troops and military equipment from Ukraine and respect Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders.

Mr. França Danese (Brazil): I thank the briefers for their briefings.

Brazil attaches great importance to the freedom of religion or belief without discrimination. We believe in the potential of religious practice to advance the human spirit, bring peoples and cultures together, build trust and contribute to the peaceful resolution of disputes.

We regret that the conflict has also contaminated ties between orthodox communities in Russia and Ukraine. We take note of the recent detention of clerics of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Brazil reaffirms its confidence in the full application of the rule of law and in the discernment of the judicial authorities to ensure the rights of the detainees, including respect for their religious freedom.

Brazil's position on this issue remains unchanged. I would like to reiterate three points.

First, freedom of religion is a fundamental human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, adopted by the General Assembly in 1981 (General Assembly resolution 36/55). It is also a fundamental tenet of our own Constitution and of our way of life as a pluralistic and multi-ethnic society.

Secondly, we encourage initiatives to promote an environment of tolerance and respect for religious diversity. Under no circumstances should religious practice be used to foment tensions between communities and States.

Thirdly, we are aware that Russia and Ukraine share the Orthodox faith as a common element of their national identities. The basis of a common religious practice can serve as a platform for dialogue, creating the conditions for peaceful coexistence in a future that we want to be close and lastly.

Brazil reiterates its call for the de-escalation of hostilities and the resumption of dialogue between Russia and Ukraine. We understand the hesitations on both sides. However, we recall the obligation of all Member States under Article 33 of the United Nations Charter to seek the settlement of disputes by peaceful means. We reiterate our commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and to the recognition of the legitimate security concerns of everyone in the region.

Mr. Fernandes (Mozambique): I wish to thank all briefers for their insights.

Mozambique continues to be deeply concerned over the continued escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The current divisions are pushing the possibility of peaceful coexistence between Ukrainian and Russian worshippers of the Orthodox faith even further away. We should reject any use of religion or the defence of one's faith as a pretext for inciting violence or hatred.

Mozambique wishes to remind all parties that infringing upon basic freedoms, including the freedom of religion or belief, goes against key principles of international law, including paragraph 3 of Article 1 of the United Nations Charter and Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Drawing from Mozambique's own experience, we attest to

the importance of faith and spirituality, which are essential pillars for promoting reconciliation within and between communities.

In times of conflict, religious leaders and sites can provide a safe space for those seeking refuge, and that space must be preserved and protected at all times. Ideally, our religious leaders should preach and teach peace and ensure that empathy prevails despite the heavy toll of the conflict. We must ensure that the most fundamental human needs — safety, health, freedom and respect — are provided for. Ultimately, that will be instrumental in achieving lasting peace in a conflict-prone world. Indeed, by their very nature religion and faith can be potent drivers for healing after conflict and can promote social cohesion, weaving a tapestry of unity from the threads of discord.

History is full of instances where religion has been used as a tool to indoctrinate generations with lasting hatred. The damaging effects of religious schisms and prejudices can last well beyond the end of a conflict, leading to cycles of retribution through generations. Mozambique strongly urges all the parties to avoid using language that might incite violence, discrimination or hostility towards individuals or groups. Weaponizing this highly sensitive issue will only undermine efforts to achieve future reconciliation.

In conclusion, we reiterate our call on all the parties to immediately cease fighting, and we appeal to all involved to uphold a culture of tolerance, respect and understanding and to resume negotiations in line with the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Mrs. Ngyema Ndong (Gabon) (*spoke in French*): I thank the briefers for their insights.

While the international community continues to appeal wholeheartedly for a swift end to the war in Ukraine, clashes on various fronts continue to escalate. One of the most profound and significant of them is the Orthodox Church, which has continued to pay a heavy price. In the now all-out war being waged by the parties to the conflict, the clergy are also being affected, with churches faced with choices that go beyond religion and belief. More and more civilian infrastructure continues to be ruined — the number of places of worship destroyed now stands at well over 100 — and religious representatives are no longer safe. It is the responsibility of all parties to the conflict to refrain from turning places of worship into battlefields. The Church must remain faithful to its vocation and

its message must remain one of unity and love for all peoples and all nations.

Gabon would like to recall that freedom of religion or belief is guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as by the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. The parties are obliged to respect the relevant provisions of international instruments. The international community must do its utmost to ensure that the Orthodox Church retains its universal role and sacred character. It must not be the object of threats or reprisals, let alone targeted attacks.

Mr. Geng Shuang (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I listened attentively to the statements made by today's briefers.

Religion is an important part of human civilization and a vital embodiment of cultures. Peace, solidarity, harmony and cordiality are the shared objectives and principles generally upheld by religions across the world. Nevertheless, throughout history, wars and conflicts caused by reasons related to religion have forced humankind to learn painful lessons. Religious issues are often complex and delicate. When handled inappropriately, they will likely aggravate tensions, fuel animosity and even lead to confrontation. China has consistently maintained that different religions and denominations should respect one another, enhance exchanges and promote harmony. It is important to advocate a culture of peace and inject positive energy aimed at increasing mutual trust, defusing tensions and preserving peace.

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine is producing ever more spillover effects, with the resulting ramifications continuing to make themselves felt. The fundamental way out lies in the achievement of a political settlement of the Ukrainian issue. Military means are not an alternative to dialogue and negotiation, which are the right choice. China hopes that the parties will remain rational, exercise restraint and relaunch peace talks as soon as possible. We call on the international community to create a positive atmosphere and establish the necessary conditions to that end. China will continue to stand on the side of peace and dialogue and work untiringly with the international community to achieve a political settlement of the Ukrainian issue.

Mr. Abushahab (United Arab Emirates): Throughout the more than 500 days since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, this Chamber has heard discussions on obstructions to humanitarian access, violations of international humanitarian law and the reality of the conflict for civilians and communities.

Intolerance is one of the more intangible aspects of the war. It seeps into the social fabric of everyday life, fuelling the conflict. The United Arab Emirates condemns all forms of intolerance. In our own region we have seen the detrimental consequences of the politicization of religion and of unchecked incitement to violence masquerading as religious faith. The significant role played by tolerance and peaceful coexistence when it comes to peace and security was acknowledged just weeks ago by the Council when it unanimously adopted resolution 2686 (2023) (see S/PV.9347). The Member States sitting around this table were united in their support of the tenets that the resolution upholds. We recognize that intolerance could contribute to driving the outbreak, escalation and recurrence of conflict. At the same time, we recognize the importance of interreligious dialogue and the role of religious leaders in promoting peaceful coexistence that supports peacebuilding efforts.

Cultural heritage and religious sites are physical manifestations of belief. As such, they are often put at risk when intolerance, hatred and extremism spread. Since the beginning of the war, UNESCO has verified damage to 270 cultural sites in Ukraine, including 116 religious sites. We have both a legal and a moral imperative to ensure the protection of cultural heritage. Resolution 2347 (2017) affirms that directing unlawful attacks on cultural heritage sites may constitute a war crime in certain circumstances. Cultural heritage is also a prism through which we can view our common humanity. As we have seen in other contexts, places of worship, as focal points for communities of faith, can serve as important platforms for post-war healing and peacebuilding.

Every act of religious intolerance or destruction to sites serves only to escalate and prolong the conflict. We reiterate our position that there can be no military solution to the war, as well as our commitment to supporting all efforts aimed at bringing it to a peaceful, just and lasting resolution in line with the Charter of the United Nations. We also stress that the parties must uphold their responsibilities under international law and avoid committing any acts of hostility directed at

cultural objects and places of worship, which constitute the cultural and spiritual heritage of peoples. Protecting cultural heritage is a key part of making and sustaining peace after conflict.

Ms. Oppong-Ntiri (Ghana): I thank the briefers for their perspectives on developments relating to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

More than 500 days after the Russian Federation first invaded Ukraine, the prospect of peace is still a distant one. The mistrust that the war in Ukraine has created among its country's nationals is painful to see, but it is even more painful to see that religion, which is universally acknowledged as a rallying platform for peace, has been dragged into the ongoing conflict. We urge that religion not be politicized and that people of different faiths be encouraged to live together.

During the 17 January meeting of the Council on the subject (see S/PV.9245), we expressed the hope that the regulations deemed necessary by the authorities of Ukraine to combat alleged acts of subversion by some members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church would be temporary and related only to the efforts to ensure public order during the war. We are, however, worried about ongoing reports of persisting restrictions on some religious sects, which have an impact on the rights of some segments of the Ukrainian population. Freedom of religion is a right intended to enhance the stability and cohesion of societies, and its curtailment could lead to an opposite outcome. We therefore urge for the respect of the rights of all nationals of Ukraine, throughout all parts of the internationally recognized borders of Ukraine, without discrimination.

We also note with concern reports by UNESCO of approximately 110 religious sites that have been damaged as a result of the war. We recall that such attacks or destruction of religious places, sites and shrines violates international law, in particular international human rights law and international humanitarian law, as they have more than material significance for the dignity and lives of persons holding spiritual or religious beliefs.

We underscore the importance of promoting tolerance and respect for religious and cultural diversity and the universal promotion and protection of human rights. Additionally, we encourage the resolution of systematic violations of human rights through appropriate human rights instruments, such as the

Human Rights Council and the Council of the Europe, and not through other means.

As history has shown, some of the heinous crimes committed against humanity were premised on religion, especially in instances in which the lines between religion and politics seemed to be clouded. It is for that reason that we appeal to all actors to exercise tolerance of and mutual respect for other faiths, beliefs or religious preferences in order to harness the positive dividends of religion, including the hope and peace it brings to our world.

We believe that a speedy resolution of the war remains critical in tackling the religious divisions that the war in Ukraine has generated and call on the Council and the international community to support such a goal by finding our common purpose. We must find a pragmatic way to assist the parties in agreeing to a cessation of hostilities and in committing to dialogue that must lead to a just and sustainable solution to the conflict.

Mr. Spasse (Albania): We are used to the practice of what has proved to be “meetings of opportunity” that Russia has been calling regularly on Ukraine. Most of the time they fail to bring forward an issue worth the discussion and the attention of the Council, since the intention is to divert the attention away from the real issues — the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and its disastrous consequences. Today's meeting about the Ukrainian Orthodox Church falls into the same category.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is clear — everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Albania fully supports freedom of religion and belief anywhere, including in Ukraine. But the real problem in Ukraine today is not freedom of religion. It is just freedom — a fundamental right that Russia is trying to steal through sheer violence. Everything else is only a consequence of that brutal use of force.

We believe that religious leaders anywhere should work for peace, social cohesion and peaceful coexistence. It is their commitment and their duty. We expect them to be a strong voice of reason and humanity and not become an extension and instrument of the State and its action. And, as we have seen to our regret, that is not done by blessing Russian tanks on their way to kill innocent people in Ukraine. They would better

off trying to stop them in the name of the humanity for which they pretend to work.

Mr. Camilleri (Malta): I thank the briefers for their statements.

Only last week, the Council heard Under-Secretary-General DiCarlo echoing the words of the Secretary-General, describing life in Ukraine as a living hell, as a result of Russia's aggression, adding that nowhere is safe in the country (see S/PV.9380). Emergency Relief Coordinator Griffiths reminded us that the war had a significant humanitarian impact far beyond Ukraine's borders at a time when the world was already reeling from various shocks.

The Russian Federation's response to those unequivocal statements was to call for today's meeting to try to justify its crimes, violations and human rights abuses. That approach is not new and has been used by Russia several times since the beginning of its aggression. What is even more disconcerting this time around is that today's meeting comes just a couple of days after Russia's barbaric attack in Odesa severely damaged the Transfiguration Cathedral, the largest Orthodox church in the city. We strongly condemn that attack against culture heritage and call on the Russian Federation to take meaningful action to comply with its obligations under international law. That includes the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and the 1972 World Heritage Convention.

As we have previously pointed out, Malta considers allegations of human rights violations, including those related to freedom of religion or belief, with utmost seriousness. On multiple occasions, we have consistently condemned ideologies and hate speech that promote racism, discrimination, xenophobia and other manifestations of intolerance. We have consistently engaged in a constructive manner to discuss those issues and treat them with the respect they deserve.

Today's meeting does not do anything of the sort. It does not seek dialogue. It does not seek understanding. It does not seek solutions. It seeks to appropriate and distort a sensitive subject to distract the international community. It seeks to deviate our focus from the appalling situation in Ukraine resulting from Russia's actions in violation of the Charter of the United Nations.

In conclusion, we once again urge the Russian Federation to immediately cease all hostilities and

unconditionally and completely withdraw all its forces and military equipment from the entire territory of Ukraine, within its internationally recognized borders.

Mrs. Sánchez Izquierdo (Ecuador) (*spoke in Spanish*): With regard to the subject of today's meeting, I listened closely to the statements made by the briefers.

I would like to reiterate Ecuador's recognition of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, in accordance with article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Ecuador is therefore concerned about the use of religion to exacerbate conflict or violence, or even to justify it. We condemn the fact that five days after the Russian Federation requested today's meeting, its air strikes on Odesa resulted in the destruction of the historic Orthodox Transfiguration Cathedral.

Just yesterday, the General Assembly adopted, once again, a resolution on promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue and tolerance in countering hate speech and promoting an end to violence (General Assembly resolution 77/318). We reiterated this principle in the Council debate held on 14 June (see S/PV.9347). But what greater act of violence is there than to invade and militarily attack a neighbouring country? I therefore reiterate my country's strong call for a definitive end to the military aggression.

Mr. Hauri (Switzerland) (*spoke in French*): Switzerland condemns the recent Russian strikes against Odesa and other regions. We will address that subject in greater detail in the next meeting. The serious damage suffered by the Transfiguration Cathedral in Odesa on Sunday gives today's meeting a sad sense of urgency.

Switzerland remains deeply concerned about the violations of international humanitarian law and the grave human rights violations resulting from the Russian military aggression. We join High Commissioner Volker Türk in condemning the appalling price of war.

Concerning freedom of religion and belief, I recall the obligations under international human rights law, including those set out in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Everyone must be able to exercise their right to freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association, and religion without discrimination. Freedom of religion and belief protects the individual, not religions or

religious communities. Any measure restricting the right to manifest one's religion or belief must be prescribed by law, serve a legitimate public interest and be necessary and proportionate.

I also reiterate Switzerland's opposition to the spread of hate speech and to any form of defamation or discrimination based on religion. We call on religious institutions and leaders to commit to a rhetoric of peace and reconciliation. Switzerland calls for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine, in accordance with international law and the Charter of the United Nations in particular. We once again call on Russia to cease its combat operations and to withdraw its troops from Ukrainian territory without delay.

Mr. De Rivi re (France) (*spoke in French*): This meeting is yet another diversionary exercise orchestrated by Russia as part of its disinformation campaign. I will therefore limit my remarks to the essential.

To date, it is Russia's actions in its war of aggression against Ukraine that have violated human rights. Numerous United Nations reports have already shown that they include intentional abuse, the bombing of civilian infrastructure and even the forced displacement of children. By asking for this meeting to be called, Russia is once again pursuing its propaganda agenda.

Let us get the facts straight. It is Russia that is targeting religious sites, as we have seen in its strike on the Cathedral of the Transfiguration in Odesa. In the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine, the situation of members of the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Jehovah's Witnesses, Crimean Tatars and Protestants has continued to deteriorate. A number of cases of persecution and discrimination have been recorded against Tatars in Crimea.

Documenting the facts and combating impunity for the perpetrators of such abuses is therefore crucial. That is why France welcomes the work of the Ukrainian justice system, international justice and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine of the Human Rights Council. This meeting is nothing but a pretext to force us to look away from the atrocities that Russia is committing in Ukraine. We condemn Russia's choice to once again exploit the issue of human rights and fundamental freedoms for the purpose of disinformation. We will support Ukraine and the Ukrainian people for as long as it takes. And we demand once again that Russia respect the ruling

of the International Court of Justice of 16 March 2022 ordering the Russian army to return to Russia.

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of the United Kingdom.

The United Kingdom is committed to ensuring that everyone, everywhere, can enjoy the human right to freedom of religion or belief — a commitment we share with Ukraine, which has been fighting to protect democracy, plurality and human rights in Ukraine from Russian assault for decades. The Head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, has expressed open support for Putin's illegal invasion, which has brought so much suffering upon Ukraine. As Ms. Saad said earlier, that suffering includes the recent destruction of the Cathedral in Odesa. And to think that Russia has the audacity to lecture us about religious freedom.

It is entirely understandable that Ukraine wants to protect its national security in the face of those attacks, and it has every right to do so. If Russia is serious about ensuring freedom of religion and belief in Ukraine, instead of using spurious Security Council meetings to advance the kind of disinformation that we have heard today — and that I fear has not finished — it should end this senseless war and withdraw its forces.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

The representative of the Russian Federation has asked to make a further statement.

Mr. Polyanskiy (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): I will not hide our extreme disappointment and bewilderment about the attempts by a number of Western delegations to capitalize on the huge tragedy that took place this week, the considerable damage inflicted on the Cathedral of the Transfiguration of the Saviour in the city of Odesa, and to attribute responsibility for it to Russia. If their capitals had any respect at all for the truth, they would refrain from such insinuations. After all, if a Russian missile had actually struck the Cathedral, as the Zelenskyy regime was quick to claim, there would have been nothing left of it. However, it was damaged, but not completely destroyed. The nature of the damage within the structure clearly points to the Kyiv regime and unmistakably indicates that the Cathedral was hit by a Ukrainian anti-aircraft missile.

As we know, air-defence missiles are filled with thousands of pieces of shrapnel, which when they explode in the air, are supposed to disperse as widely

as possible and to destroy aircraft. That was what we saw huge amounts of embedded in the walls of the Cathedral, photos of which were posted on social networks by Ukrainian users. Attack missiles do not contain that shrapnel, and their impact is significantly greater. Moreover, the same people on social media posted numerous videos on the Internet of a missile that was launched and failed to gain altitude. It then fell right away and exploded. In the flash of the explosion, the spire of the bell tower of the Cathedral, which is located right in the explosion epicentre, is clearly visible.

As we have said repeatedly at previous meetings, the main and essentially only threat to civilians in Ukrainian cities during Russia's precision strikes on the infrastructure facilities related to the Kyiv regime's military capabilities lies in that country's air-defence forces, which continue to be deployed in residential areas and city centres, in violation of the basic norms of international humanitarian law. We can find dozens of similar images from Odesa on social networks, captured the day before the anti-aircraft missile hit the Cathedral. If the air-defence facilities had been located outside residential neighbourhoods, the tragedy would not have happened, just as with the many others in which civilians have been killed. We do not target peaceful civilian objects with our attacks. Incidentally, in the same video clips we can see the explosions caused by ammunition and equipment at what Ukraine claims are grain storage and port facilities, which, as has now become clear, it has been using for military purposes under the cover of and in violation of the Black Sea Grain Initiative.

It is remarkable that, instead of correcting the problems caused by its air-defence systems, the Zelenskyy regime has decided that people posting such truthful evidence that compromises the Ukrainian authorities will be punished even more severely. We understand that the Ukrainian Parliament has hastily introduced a draft bill proposing three-year prison sentences for the people who post such things. Council members can draw their own conclusions.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Ukraine.

Mr. Kyslytsya (Ukraine): I will not read my full statement at this meeting for the sake of brevity. We will make the full version available.

We regret that Russia persists in misusing the platform of the Security Council in its attempts to substantiate its propaganda narratives aimed at legitimizing the invasion of Ukraine. I will not dignify the humbug of the Russian representative by commenting on it. What I would like to do is cite Metropolitan Agafangel of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which has been referred to so often in the Chamber today. He is the Head of the diocese of Odesa. He wrote in a letter following the attack,

“On the orders of the leadership of the Russian Federation, a Russian missile hit the spiritual heart of the peace-loving city of Odesa, its Cathedral of the Transfiguration. Since 24 February 2022, Russia has launched a large-scale military aggression against our native Ukraine.” People are dying, human blood is being shed, cities and villages, churches and monasteries are being destroyed. Whatever the goal of the shameful so-called special military operation, it cannot justify killing and violence, destruction and forced displacement. We still do not understand. What do they want to liberate us from? Life? It is a true genocide of the Ukrainian people. A country that considers itself Orthodox cannot pay lip service to God's law and at the same time do evil and bring darkness.”

What is important is that those are questions asked by a person whom Moscow itself had seemed to trust and listen to, based on the fact that Putin himself awarded Metropolitan Agafangel the Order of Honour and the Order of Friendship some years ago. He is not our briefer, not a person in our pocket or our witness, but a person whom Putin himself awarded multiple medals. We are all interested in getting an answer to the question posed by Metropolitan Agafangel, a question that the Russian delegation has not yet been able to provide answers to. Instead, it persists in mocking the mandate and procedures of this United Nations organ.

Let me conclude by repeating the question asked by Metropolitan Agafangel. What do they want to liberate us from? Why are they committing a genocide of the Ukrainian people? When will their Government stop paying lip service to God's law and doing evil and bringing darkness?

The meeting rose at 11.30 a.m.