



Security Council

Seventy-eighth year

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New York

Provisional

President: Mr. Geng Shuang (China)

Members:

Albania	Ms. Dautllari
Brazil	Mr. Moretti
Ecuador	Mrs. Sánchez Izquierdo
France	Mr. De Rivière
Gabon	Mrs. Koumba Pambo
Ghana	Mr. Anyanah
Japan	Mr. Yamanaka
Malta	Ms. Gatt
Mozambique	Mr. Fernandes
Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
Switzerland	Mr. Hauri
United Arab Emirates	Ms. Matar
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Mr. Eckersley
United States of America	Mr. Wood

Agenda

Threats to international peace and security

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

Threats to international peace and security

The President (*spoke in Chinese*): 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. Ilze Brands Kehris; Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights; and Mr. Vakhtang Kipshidze, Vice-Chairman of the Synodal Department for Church Relations with Society and Mass Media of the Moscow Patriarchate.

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

I give the floor to Ms. Brands Kehris.

Ms. Brands Kehris: Precisely 10 months ago, on 17 January, I briefed the Security Council as a representative of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on issues related to the freedom of religion or belief and the broader human rights dimension of the war in Ukraine (see S/PV.9245). Since my previous briefing, the civilian toll of the full-scale armed attack by the Russian Federation against Ukraine has unfortunately further increased considerably. To date, OHCHR has recorded nearly 10,000 civilians killed and over 18,000 injured, as compared to 7,000 and 11,000, respectively, reported to the Council on 17 January.

The conflict has also inflicted extensive damage on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, homes, schools and medical facilities, and in recent months the port facilities and grain silos that enable Ukraine to export food. As winter approaches and temperatures start to drop below freezing, humanitarian needs will be magnified. The most vulnerable — the elderly, those with disabilities and the displaced living in collective centres — will be the most at risk.

The impact of the war extends beyond the high casualties and broad physical destruction, reaching

deep into the fabric of Ukrainian society. It is in that context that we are also monitoring the situation of the freedom of religion across Ukraine, in both territory controlled by the Government of Ukraine and territory occupied by the Russian Federation.

Tensions between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which has historic links to the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which obtained autocephaly under the Constantinople Patriarchate in 2019, including over ownership of land and buildings, increased following the Russian Federation's full-scale armed attack in February 2022, in some cases manifesting in violent incidents. Those tensions have affected the freedom of religion in the territory controlled by the Government of Ukraine, as documented in consecutive recent Human Rights Monitoring Mission reports.

First, since February 2022, OHCHR has documented 10 cases of physical violence and six cases of threatened violence resulting from disputes between parishioners of different Orthodox communities. Regrettably, Ukrainian law enforcement's response in those cases has been inadequate, failing to sufficiently investigate incidents and take action to protect members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Half of those incidents occurred in March and April of this year, and the number of incidents subsequently decreased. In that regard, the recommendations in the Human Rights Committee concluding observations on Ukraine from February 2022 (CCPR/C/UKR/CO/8) are still relevant, including the protection of places of worship against acts of violence, intimidation and vandalism and ensuring that all cases of violence are thoroughly and promptly investigated and that those responsible are sanctioned.

Secondly, since February 2022, of the over 6,600 criminal cases brought against individuals for collaboration and other conflict-related crimes in Ukraine, 68 have involved Ukrainian Orthodox Church clergy members, according to Ukrainian authorities. OHCHR is monitoring 44 of those cases. It is particularly important to ensure full respect for due process and fair trial rights in those extremely sensitive cases. In at least 26 cases involving Ukrainian Orthodox Church clergy members, we have identified concerns regarding the fairness of the criminal proceedings, such as the accused not having access to a lawyer during a search of his home, or pressure from prosecutors to confess in order to obtain lighter charges or be included in a

prisoner exchange. Our findings have come in the context of our broader reporting on due process and fair trial issues that have arisen in proceedings against conflict-related detainees as a whole.

Thirdly, OHCHR is closely monitoring how legislative developments in Ukraine may impact the enjoyment of the freedom of religion and, as in previous Human Rights Monitoring Mission reports, has previously expressed concern over the cumulative impact of the Government actions targeting the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that could be discriminatory.

In October 2023, Ukraine's Parliament approved in its first reading a set of draft amendments to the law on religious organizations. That would establish a procedure for the dissolution of "religious organizations affiliated with influence centres, the management of which is located in a country [that] carries out armed aggression against Ukraine." The draft law is now being considered in a committee in preparation for a second reading. We urge lawmakers to carefully consider article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the related Human Rights Committee jurisprudence. International law permits restrictions on the freedom to manifest religion only if they are prescribed by law and necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. That is to be narrowly interpreted, and limitations must be directly related and proportionate to the specific purpose pursued.

As a next step, we would urge lawmakers to clearly define the specific legitimate aim of the proposed restrictions and ensure their necessity and proportionality and revise the text accordingly. I invite Ukrainian lawmakers to make use of the expert analysis of the United Nations and other international organizations — as they have done for other laws — to assess whether the proposed means are clearly defined and the least intrusive ones possible for achieving the specific aim, and whether the proposed amendments comply with international legal standards.

OHCHR also has serious concerns about the freedom of religion in the Ukrainian territory occupied by the Russian Federation. International humanitarian law obliges the occupying Power to respect the laws in force in the country. However, the Russian Federation applies its own laws in occupied territory, which has resulted in restrictions on religious minorities.

Previous reports of the Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine have also documented cases of enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment and unlawful deportation perpetrated by Russian armed forces against the clergy and members of Ukrainian Greek Catholic and Christian Evangelical communities in the Zaporizhzhya, Kherson and Kharkiv regions.

In Crimea, Russian authorities have prosecuted members of Jehovah's Witnesses and Hizb ut-Tahrir — two organizations that are prohibited in the Russian Federation, but not in Ukraine — sometimes sentencing them to long prison terms. Since February 2022, we have documented the prosecution of nine members of Jehovah's Witnesses. Most recently, on 24 August 2023, following house searches, the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation arrested six Crimean Tatar men for their alleged membership of Hizb ut-Tahrir. After 24 February 2022, Russian authorities arrested 18 Crimean Tatar men in Crimea for suspected involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir. They potentially face long-term sentences in prison.

We have also seen that occupying authorities have taken action against the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. In Simferopol, the occupying authorities evicted the Orthodox Church of Ukraine from the Cathedral, depriving parishioners of their last place of worship in the city.

Our Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine has reported individual cases of arbitrary detention and torture of clergymen in occupied territory.

Last month, the documented arbitrary detention of two priests from the Orthodox Church of Ukraine in the occupied Donetsk oblast was reported. They were accused of anti-Russian and extremist behaviour for publicly expressing support for the Ukrainian authorities.

The latest periodic report of the Human Rights Monitoring Mission, which was issued in October, included the arbitrary detention of two Orthodox clergymen in occupied territory, one of whom reported having been tortured.

In May of this year, a pro-Ukrainian priest from the Kherson oblast was released after spending 262 days in detention, where he was reportedly tortured. Formal charges were never brought against him, but he reported having been questioned repeatedly about why

he conducted church services in Ukrainian and prayed for Ukrainian forces.

Those cases of alleged torture of the clergy fit into a pattern of widespread torture of civilian detainees, as publicly reported by the Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine.

Concerns regarding the enjoyment of the freedom of religion in Ukraine, including in occupied territory, have increased since February 2022. Restoring peace and respect for the Charter of the United Nations and international law is urgent. While the war and occupation persist, we call on all parties to ensure that all people in Ukraine have full freedom to manifest and practice their religion or belief, in line with international human rights law.

The President (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank Ms. Brands Kehris for her briefing.

I now give the floor to Mr. Kipshidze.

Mr. Kipshidze (*spoke in Russian*): I thank you, Mr. President, for the opportunity to speak in the Chamber. The United Nations was established as an institution with a duty to promote cooperation in the area of human rights, primary among which is religious freedom. Over the centuries of its history, humankind has begun to understand that it is impossible to forcibly compel an individual to believe something different to what they themselves wish to believe.

The Russian Orthodox Church underwent decades of godless persecution. A century ago, after the October Revolution, believers became enemies of the State. They were persecuted for their faith; churches were seized and blown up; and the memory of religious history was destroyed. We would never have thought that such history would repeat itself in present-day Ukraine, but an analysis of the situation leads us to the conclusion that the authorities of that country have set as their objective the total annihilation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church — the religious community to which the majority of Ukrainians belong.

Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians were baptized more than 1,000 years ago, in 988, as a single people. That is a historical fact recognized by public figures and scientists around the world. It is therefore natural that we belong to a single Church, honour the same saints and preserve the same spiritual heritage. That reality is unrelated to momentary politics, including the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict — rather, it

has been shaped over centuries without any connection to the relations developed among States.

However, the current Ukrainian Government, encroaching on the principle of religious freedom, decided in 2018 to create a new Orthodox church that would be built on the renunciation of those over 1,000 years of history. The current canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church has been presented as an enemy of the State for the refusal to abandon its own identity. Those worshippers who do not want to convert to the new church should, according to the Ukrainian authorities, be deprived of their churches and monasteries. Just look at the recent expulsion of monks from the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, a monastery that serves as a symbol of international orthodox faith.

Violations of the rights of believers in Ukraine have been confirmed by both United Nations agencies and independent experts. That has been stated in particular in the report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights dated 4 October 2023. It was also attested to by the Ukrainian journalist Yan Taksyur in his statement at a Security Council meeting on 26 July (see S/PV.9385). In September, an American lawyer, Bob Amsterdam, convincingly spoke about the persecution of Ukrainian believers in a conversation with a popular television presenter, Tucker Carlson. Christian researchers in Europe have also recognized violations of religious freedom, including a professor at the University of Münster, Thomas Bremer, who published a report on 15 September in which he rejected the results of the so-called religious expert examination prepared in Ukraine to justify the liquidation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Indeed, the Ukrainian authorities want to deprive the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of its legal rights and to liquidate it.

The Primate of the Russian Church, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, has repeatedly sent messages to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Secretaries General of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Council of Europe, offering evidence of widespread violations of the rights of worshippers in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Unfortunately, we have heard only silence in response. It would seem that the international community is indifferent to the shameless destruction of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which unites tens of millions of believers. Moreover, the testimonies of Russian religious figures in defence of members of

the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are considered by the Ukrainian intelligence services as just another reason for their persecution. But we do not hear and, sadly, will not hear the voices of believers in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church at the Security Council. They are intimidated and afraid to openly defend their rights because, in this case, they face reprisals on the territory of Ukraine. The exception is Yan Taksyur, a Ukrainian Orthodox journalist who spoke here in the summer, only because he managed to leave the territory of Ukraine as part of a prisoner exchange and therefore felt relatively safe.

The first step towards restoring peace in Ukraine, in our opinion, is to end the persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. I call on the members of the Security Council to set aside political differences to protect ordinary worshippers from unprecedented repression. The clergy and the laity, monks and bishops should not become bargaining chips in world politics. If the members of the Security Council fail to adopt consistent measures to restore the rights of believers in Ukraine, then people's faith will continue to be abused.

Let me recall that, in 2022 and 2023, 70 criminal proceedings were initiated against members of the clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, under the jurisdiction of Metropolitan Onufriy, 16 of which targeted Metropolitans. All of those cases are politically motivated. Twenty-six bishops and clerics were indicted and 19 received judicial sentences. One day a book will be published about the victims of the anti-church terror carried out against clerics in the Ukrainian church, but this list begins today. Criminal cases against Ukrainian hierarchs are publicly endorsed by the Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, who is taking revenge on them for their unwillingness to join the new religious structure that was established by the Ukrainian authorities, the so-called Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which is schismatic in terms of canonical law.

We have become accustomed to hearing about the religious neutrality of States in the Western world. However, at the international level, we see the opposite. In February, President of the United States Joe Biden visited Kyiv and met with the head of the schismatic community, which had been established by the authorities, and which incidentally is a beneficiary of all the persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, since all the churches and monasteries that were illegally seized by the State have already been

transferred, or will be transferred, to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine — the community that the President of the United States graced with his high presence. That sends a message that the current Administration of the President of the United States supports the so-called correct religious community, and the incorrect religious community can be dealt with as the State wishes. That is quite contrary to the views held by the first settlers who made the journey to America on the Mayflower, who were also considered to be an incorrect religious community in seventeenth century England.

When we reviewed the record for the previous meeting on the issue of protection of the rights of worshippers in Ukraine (see S/PV.9386), we saw a coordinated attempt to justify the persecution of believers by an armed conflict. That attempt is immoral. The repression of worshippers cannot be justified by circumstances of armed hostilities. The history of humankind is rife with wars, but even under those conditions, freedom can and must be defended by all parties to the conflict.

On 5 January, the Primate of the Russian Church, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, turned to the parties to the conflict with a call for a ceasefire and for the establishment of a Christmas truce, on 7 January, so that people on both sides could commemorate the great Christian holiday. The Russian side supported that initiative, but the Ukrainian side categorically rejected the idea of a ceasefire, even though the tradition of Christmas truces has deep roots in European history.

The Russian Orthodox Church has become accustomed to State and near-State Ukrainian media outlets viewing any of our testimony in defence of the rights of worshippers in Ukraine as evidence of guilt of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. They think that, if Russia and Ukraine are in a state of conflict, a *carte blanche* has been given for the shameless destruction of everything related to the collective spiritual history of the Russian-Ukrainian people, and the first to be destroyed are Ukrainian worshippers. However, in our view, that is a completely nefarious logic. Throughout history, the world has endured a number of wars, but if the hostile States in every war destroyed their cultural and historic ties established over the course of centuries, they would plunge into the abyss of barbarism. Faith must be a peaceful space, and priests have been part of armies throughout the centuries of European history — not to foment hatred, but to ensure that there be some place for mercy for the prisoners,

civilians and defenceless people in all the suffering caused by war.

Once again, I urge the members of the Security Council to abandon political differences and, for the sake of respect for the principle of religious freedom, to adopt effective, immediate measures to protect the rights of worshippers in Ukraine. I take the liberty of recalling that the value of religious choice has been recognized by European civilization since the time of the Peace of Westphalia. Today, in the twenty-first century, are we really unable to protect a church from persecution because we are guided solely by political ambitions?

The President (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank Mr. Kipshidze for his briefing.

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

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): Today, once again, we convened a meeting of the Security Council to draw the attention of the international community to the cynical persecution of the canonical orthodoxy in Ukraine, which has been unfolding before our very eyes. We are grateful for the participation in today's meeting of the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Ms. Ilze Brands Kehris, and the Vice-Chairman of the Synodal Department for Church Relations with Society and Mass Media of the Moscow Patriarchate, Mr. Vakhtang Kipshidze.

At the outset, we wish to emphasize that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church did not request that today's meeting be held, nor did it authorize us to speak on its behalf. Individual clergy or parishioners also did not do so. We are saying this so that the Ukrainian law enforcement will not take today's meeting as a pretext to conduct reprisals against peoples and churches who are already their hostages.

Nine months ago, on 17 January, during the first Council meeting Russia convened on this topic (see S/PV.9245), Ms. Brands Kehris voiced concern about the Ukrainian Parliament introducing legislation according to which there could be a prohibition of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. At that point, she correctly noted that such adoption could undermine the right to freedom of religion, conscience and belief enshrined in article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Today, Ms. Brands Kehris did not find

the words to condemn that draft law, which is currently under consideration by the Ukrainian Parliament to prohibit an ancient canonical orthodox church. Instead of raising the alarm and demanding the draft law be rescinded, today she read out a lecture on how best to formulate it so that it not seem so appalling. Moreover, she was unable to say a single word of condemnation of the use by Kyiv's law enforcement machinery to persecute respected clergy.

On 19 October, the Ukrainian Parliament adopted, on the first reading, draft law No. 8371 introducing changes to some laws in Ukraine on the activities of religious organizations in Ukraine, the only purpose of which is a complete prohibition of the activities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. If adopted, the aforementioned draft law would legally prohibit the activity of any Ukrainian religious organization "affiliated with centres of influence in Russia" — that is how it is worded. Moreover, the authors of the current draft law are stating the specific religious organization they have in mind, that is, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The procedure for identifying that affiliation is tailor-made to serve that purpose. There are no clear criteria, and the choice is left to the discretion of the State service of Ukraine for freedom of conscience and religion, headed by the well-known fighter against orthodoxy, Viktor Yelensky. In that way, the draft law, if adopted, will become a practical step towards the destruction of an ancient church with millions of parishioners. Even during the Great Patriotic War, the German fascist occupiers did not go that far, but the current Kyiv regime did.

President Zelenskyy, who began his career as a comedian and a showman, promised to bring peace to Donbas, but instead he unleashed a new wave of escalation that resulted in this conflict. Today, it seems that he decided to share the notorious fate of well-known Roman persecutors of Christians — emperors Claudius, Nero, Trajan and Diocletian. Under his leadership, measures have been consistently adopted from legislative and pseudo-law enforcement, to the level of the media, with the purpose of eradicating canonical orthodoxy in Ukraine. All that is missing is the Colosseum with the public maiming and mutilations of Christians. However, the Kyiv regime is moving with confidence in that direction, and that is not a figure of speech. In our time, on 2 May 2014 in Odesa, before the eyes of the entire world, a zealous crowd of Ukrainian nationalists burned alive participants of the peaceful

protest against Maidan who were locked up in the trade union building. We will never forget that crime. A broad disinformation campaign has been launched to discredit the clergy in the eyes of the flock, creating the image of a henchman of the enemy.

Every day, the Ukrainian police and the Security Service of Ukraine, as well as journalists, make baseless accusations into the information space that weapons, munitions and provisions for the so-called aggressor are stored in churches. The purpose of the fakes and hate speech about so-called clergy saboteurs that is spread on social networks is obvious — the Kyiv regime is attempting to justify cleansing the country's religious space and untying the hands of radicals of all stripes to perpetrate violence and lawlessness.

Since 2019, churches of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church have been seized, and there has been forced, illegal liquidation of their communities in the guise of alleged voluntary transfers conversions to other faiths. At the same time, as we see from video clips on social networks of Ukrainian Orthodox parishioners, the seized churches are either closed or empty because the Kyiv regime lacks the necessary number of schismatics willing to serve it, nor does it have the necessary number of worshippers willing to tolerate such blasphemy. An egregious example of that practice is the expulsion of the monks of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, the oldest monastery on the territory of modern Ukraine and a symbol of canonical Orthodoxy.

The early termination by Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of the long-term lease agreement with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is mentioned even in the reports of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), which has a modest approach to that issue, apparently afraid of falling out of favour with Kyiv and its Western sponsors. I remind the Council that attempts to expel the monks from the Lavra have been undertaken since the beginning of this year. The ongoing presence of the Ukrainian authorities on its territory has been conditioned on the transfer of the clergy to an organization called the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which was essentially established pursuant to a decision of former President Poroshenko. In other words, the State is using blackmail to force monks to change their church affiliation or, plainly speaking, to join the ranks of the schismatics.

The brethren, led by Metropolitan Pavel, decided to take a stand. For that brazen display of dissent, the so-called democratic Zelenskyy regime, which aspires to become part of the civilized world, civilized world, arrested the elderly leader of the monastery, who was released on bail of approximately \$1 million. The criminal case against him is ongoing.

Today the leadership of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra reserve, working at the behest of Zelenskyy, is attempting to expel the inhabitants from the monastery by refusing to turn on the heating in the premises.

At the same time, the premises of the Lavra are being sealed and gradually handed over to the schismatics. The places of worship and other facilities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are constantly subjected to searches by the Ukrainian authorities. The clergy are being served notices of suspicion of committing crimes, and they are being arrested. The activities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are banned at the level of local and regional councils, despite the fact that such a ban is outside their authority. And these are not our views on the matter, but rather data provided by OHCHR.

Moreover, on 14 November a commission of the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine decided to transfer to the State ownership of the Yelets Assumption and Trinity monasteries, as well as of the Transfiguration Cathedral and Pyatnytska and Saint Catherine's Churches in Chernihiv, following their effective seizure from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. These were all closed to worshippers from the very beginning of the commission's work under the pretext of the need for inspection. Access to said sites was blocked by people in camouflage.

In January, Ms. Brands Kehris said that she was aware of three instances of persecution of clergy in Ukraine (see S/PV.9245). The statistics that she shared today do not match ours. Less than a year later, the number of such cases exceeded 200. In the past six months alone, OHCHR documented 10 cases of physical violence and six cases of threats as a result of conflicts among worshippers of various Orthodox Christian communities. That is what OHCHR calls the expulsion of canonical parishioners and priests from their churches. That is but a drop in the bucket, as compared to the real facts.

For example, on 28 March in Ivano-Frankivsk, criminals used tear gas in a Ukrainian Orthodox Church site where clergy and worshippers had gathered.

Several people were wounded, and one clergy member was hospitalized. Although police officers were but a few steps away from the scene, they did not disperse the criminals and did not prevent the violence. There is a well-known case of a woman who had a miscarriage as a result of a tear-gas attack. By the way, that is also included in an OHCHR report.

On 13 November, the Sosnovsky District Court of Cherkasy held another hearing regarding Metropolitan Theodosy of Cherkasy and Kaniv on mendacious accusations. Earlier, on 2 November, the court extended his house arrest, imposed since February, for another two months. In early September, clerics and worshippers of the Cherkasy diocese sent an appeal to Zelenskyy demanding to end the criminal prosecution of the Metropolitan.

On 19 May, Mikhail Zhar, also known as Metropolitan Longin, former vicar of the Holy Ascension Banchen Monastery of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, who was relieved of his post at the end of September, was served notice of a criminal case launched against him for inciting religious hatred. On 11 September, the investigation materials were submitted to the court.

At the same time, no one considered that, among other things, the Metropolitan is also the founder and head of an orphanage in Molnytsia, in the Chernivtsi oblast of Ukraine, where approximately 400 young pupils live, and he is their guardian. Several children have serious diseases, and some are disabled. Some have HIV; others suffer from cerebral palsy. All of them need special and continuous care, which the Metropolitan and hired staff had been providing. After the Security Service of Ukraine began persecuting him, the alarm was sounded by the Orthodox community and parishioners — in the event of the arrest of Mikhail Zhar, those children would face the risk of abandonment.

Incidentally, Metropolitan Longin, like most of the inhabitants and children in the monastery, are Romanians. And on 3 November Mr. Zelenskyy signed a law on upholding the rights of national minorities. That situation clearly demonstrates how the rights of national minorities are being protected in Ukraine.

Russia has repeatedly drawn the Council's attention to Kyiv's campaign to destroy canonical Orthodoxy in Ukraine. We raised that issue during Council meetings on 17 January (see S/PV.9245) and 26 July (see S/PV.9385). On 12 May, at our initiative, the Council held an Arria Formula meeting on the topic "The

situation of freedom of religion and belief in Ukraine: the persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church".

However, the Western members of the Council continue to overlook this situation. They are not allowed to criticize Zelenskyy, otherwise the question may arise of to whom exactly they are supplying weapons and for what purpose. After all, Zelenskyy and his regime are fully sponsored by the West and cannot take a single step without its instructions. It is unlikely that any of our colleagues today will dare voice any reproach to the Ukrainian dictator.

Fortunately, voices of reason are still heard around the world. Mention was already made today of the interview of Tucker Carlson, a political commentator. He has repeatedly criticized the actions of the Ukrainian authorities against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. He responded promptly after the events of December 2022, when the Security Service of Ukraine began mass raids in monasteries and churches, stating that there was no justification for such actions. I hope that the members of the Council have had an opportunity to watch his interview with lawyer Robert Amsterdam, who is currently protecting the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from persecution by the State. It was published online on 27 October. This broadcast was viewed by more than 103 million people in just the first five days. That is excellent proof of people's genuine interest in this topic, which the Western media are trying to ignore. According to the presenter, the prohibition on religious faiths fails to fit in the values of the liberal authorities. Moreover, the fact that not only Christians, but the leaders of all faiths did not stand up against the Ukrainian Government is something that he called shameful.

Those members of the Council who lecture us about the legitimacy of the Kyiv authorities' activities fail to understand the depth of the tragedy that has been unfolding. That is partly due to political considerations and unconditional support for the Kyiv regime and partly due to lack of knowledge or misunderstanding about the magnitude of what is taking place. For many here, this is a struggle of religious structures that have the word "orthodox" in their name — the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. One of them is supported by the authorities as "national" — the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The other — the Ukrainian Orthodox Church — is persecuted as a "collaborationist" structure that is subordinate to Moscow, which is a lie. In fact, this is an attempt to

reshape the mindset of tens of millions of Ukrainians, for whom the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is their native, ancient, genuine and legitimate church — the church in which they have worshipped for centuries. Zelenskyy and his clique are heaping burning coals on their own heads, fomenting religious hatred and striving to destroy the social fabric of Ukrainian society, which they declare to uphold. Those who are supporting the newly sprung persecutors of Christians in Ukraine — Zelenskyy and his regime — are becoming complicit in the horrific twenty-first century crime that is the attempt to destroy the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Ending that crime is our shared duty.

Mr. Yamanaka (Japan): I thank Assistant Secretary-General Brands Kehris and other briefer for their briefings.

Freedom of religion or belief is an indispensable and universal principle shared by the global community. In recent years, we have been witnessing countless serious human rights situations that undermine the foundation of people's lives and societies as a whole. We always stand ready to address the 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 religious freedom, we must never forget that Russia has inflicted tremendous damage on religious facilities in Ukraine. We strongly condemn Russia's attacks on religious sites in Ukraine, which are supposed to be protected. According to UNESCO, 327 cultural sites, including 124 religious sites, have been damaged since February 2022, when Russia began its aggression against Ukraine. This tragic list will become longer and longer until Russia stops its invasion of Ukraine. Without peace and stability, freedom of religion will be undermined.

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

Mr. Hauri (Switzerland) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Ms. Ilze Brands Kehris, for her briefing, and I have taken note of Mr. Kipshidze's remarks.

The work of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights is crucial and enjoys

Switzerland's full support. The documentation work of the human rights monitoring mission in Ukraine is essential for preventing violations, strengthening the rule of law and ensuring accountability.

Switzerland attaches great importance to freedom of religion and belief. On several occasions, we have emphasized the obligations arising from international human rights law, in particular the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Everyone must be able to exercise his or her rights to freedom of opinion and expression, to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and to freedom of religion without discrimination. Switzerland stresses the importance of the link between human rights and peace and security. We call on all Governments to respect their obligations so that every individual can enjoy his or her rights and fundamental freedoms. Any measures restricting the right to manifest one's religion or beliefs must be provided for by law, serve a legitimate public interest and be necessary and proportionate.

No one can justify Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, which for over 20 months has been causing immeasurable suffering far beyond the battlefield. The Assistant Secretary-General's briefing testifies once again to the gravity and extent of the damage caused to civilians since the start of the Russian military aggression. We condemn Russia's repeated air strikes, which are causing not only painful loss of life but also heavy material destruction, including of religious sites and objects. We recall the protection afforded to places of worship and religious practices under international humanitarian law. Switzerland reiterates its deep concern at the serious violations of human rights, particularly in the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia. In order to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting peace, we once again call on Russia to immediately cease its military aggression against Ukraine.

Switzerland remains fully committed to supporting serious efforts to promote peace, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. We call on religious institutions and dignitaries to also commit themselves to the promotion of peaceful coexistence and reconciliation.

Mr. Fernandes (Mozambique): We thank the briefers for their insights on this important issue.

Freedom of religion and worship, including the right not to adhere to any faith, is a fundamental human

right, as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and is crucial to the maintenance of peace and security, on which the Secretary-General is expected to provide an oral briefing to the Security Council next year.

Mozambique, being itself a diverse nation of multiple ethnicities and faiths, highly values these principles. Consequently, we believe that threats to religious freedom are inherently problematic, and they may serve as catalysts for conflict under any conditions. We are therefore concerned by the intrusion on religious freedom, especially within the Orthodox Church, due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This is particularly alarming as it heightens tensions and causes divisions within congregations. This situation is prone to the dangers of meddling in religious affairs and emphasizes the need for parties to avoid using religion as a tool to restrict worship rights. In addition, using people's beliefs to antagonize them can exacerbate and trigger new conflicts. Historical and ongoing conflicts with religious elements serve as severe warnings of the intense acrimony, hostility and division they generate across generations.

We are of the view that both Ukrainian and Russian clergy and religious leaders could be influential advocates for compassion and compromise, contributing to the cessation of hostilities and eventual reconciliation. By championing peace and reconciliation, religious leaders can be crucial in bridging divides, enhancing mutual understanding and de-escalating tensions, thereby nurturing a culture of peace. In secular States, the principle of laicity guarantees State neutrality in religious affairs, ensuring equal treatment for all faiths and beliefs. Consequently, the separation of religion and State is crucial to the fair and unbiased treatment of all religious groups and for fostering tolerance. In that regard, it is important to cultivate tolerance through active engagement with and respect for diversity, acknowledging the right of others to freely and fearlessly practise their faith. In that context, we reiterate our appeal for tolerance, mutual respect, empathy, solidarity and peaceful coexistence among Orthodox believers, which are essential for national unity in a diverse society such as that of Ukraine.

Lastly, we reiterate that ceasing hostilities and engaging in direct negotiations in good faith are the most crucial steps that can be made towards creating the conditions for tolerance to thrive. We owe it to today's long-suffering population and to future generations.

Mrs. Koumba Pambo (Gabon) (*spoke in French*): I thank the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights and the Vice-Chairman of the Synodal Department for Church Relations with Society and Mass Media of the Moscow Patriarchate for their briefings.

We have received reports from Ukraine in the past few weeks of decisions banning part of the Orthodox Church. Those developments, which are clearly linked to clashes between the clergy and political affairs, are intensifying with the stalemate in the war, as churches are having to make decisions in areas beyond those that are strictly founded in religion or belief. In that regard, I would like to emphasize that freedom of religion or belief is guaranteed by 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. The parties are therefore required to comply with the provisions of the international instruments, including in time of war.

My country calls on the parties to refrain from resorting to unilateral actions that shrink the space in which individual freedoms, including freedom of belief, association or religion, can be expressed, as well as from fuelling fear, rejection and hatred between communities. We continue to believe that when the time comes for rebuilding, attaining peace will necessarily involve achieving peace between communities, including religious communities. Investing in that endeavour will therefore increase the parties' chances of achieving a better future and lasting peace.

In conclusion, I reiterate my country's unwavering call for de-escalation and the easing of tensions with a view to creating conditions conducive to silencing the guns. Diplomacy must be prioritized.

Mr. Eckersley (United Kingdom): I thank our briefers, and I also thank the Russian delegation for bringing human rights issues to the Security Council. The United Kingdom has long believed in the link between human rights and matters of peace and security, and we are glad that the Russian delegation now appears to share that view. We look forward to further discussions on human rights in the Council.

The United Kingdom is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief for all around the world. We condemn any persecution on the grounds of religion or belief. Ukraine shares those values. It is a pluralist and multi-faith society, with the right to freedom

of religion or belief enshrined in its Constitution. Its lawmakers have sought the advice of experts on freedom of religion and belief as they respond to threats to Ukraine's national security. Russia does not share that commitment. Religious leaders are among the people who have been targeted by Russian forces and subjected to torture and enforced disappearances. Russian authorities are carrying out house searches and arbitrary arrests of Crimean Tatars, accusing them of extremism and terrorism when they are just peacefully practising their faith. Russian Orthodox priests have been disciplined for expressing opposition to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, or even defrocked for praying for peace instead of victory, and more than 100 religion sites have been damaged or destroyed since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. That includes the devastating destruction in July inflicted on the Transfiguration Cathedral, Odesa's largest Orthodox church, previously destroyed under Stalin in 1936. Our Foreign Secretary saw the extent of the damage first-hand during his visit to Odesa yesterday.

The Russian delegation is presenting itself today as a defender of the Orthodox Christian faith and its values, but is it Christian to covet and steal a neighbour's land? Is it Christian to disrupt the global supply of food? Is it Christian to kill civilians? The Orthodox faith of course does not encourage those things. It does, however, encourage the confession of sins and repentance. The best way to ensure that Ukrainians can enjoy their freedom of religion and belief, and all of their human rights, is for Russia to end its war of aggression, withdraw its forces and respect Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Mrs. Sánchez Izquierdo (Ecuador) (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Ms. Brands Kehris, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, for her informative briefing. I also listened attentively to the Vice-Chairman of the Synodal Department for Church Relations with Society and Mass Media of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Ecuador recognizes and unequivocally defends 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. We are concerned about the use of religion to exacerbate conflict and violence and even to justify them. We also regret that since the beginning of the military aggression against Ukraine, at least 142 religious

sites have been destroyed, as verified by UNESCO as part of its preliminary assessment of damage done to cultural sites. In that regard, I would like to cite article 53 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, which prohibits acts of hostility directed at places of worship that constitute the cultural or spiritual heritage of peoples.

Lastly, we will continue to defend the promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue and tolerance in every forum. We ask all religious leaders in Ukraine, Russia and around the world to call for action to counter any kind of hate speech and to promote an end to the violence, including the military occupation.

Ms. Gatt (Malta): We too thank Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Brands Kehris for her informative briefing. Regrettably, this meeting represents yet another attempt by the Russian Federation to divert attention from the real issue, which is Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Instead of focusing on that matter and other pressing issues, the Security Council's time is once again being taken up to spread disinformation and propaganda. At the outset, I want to reaffirm Malta's unwavering commitment to ensuring that all of us, everywhere, can enjoy our human rights, which include the right to freedom of religion or belief. We take all allegations of violations of human rights extremely seriously.

Let us recall the facts. Russia's actions are violating human rights and international humanitarian law. Several United Nations reports have cited evidence showing that Russian authorities have committed wilful killing, torture, sexual violence, shelling of civilian infrastructure and the deportation of children to the Russian Federation. Furthermore, Russia's ongoing attacks on Ukraine have left a wide trail of destruction across the country. The damage inflicted on the largest Orthodox church in Odesa by a Russian missile strike on 23 July is a clear example of that and adds to UNESCO's verification list of damage to more than 327 cultural, historical or artistic sites in Ukraine, including 124 religious buildings. Malta strongly condemns attacks against religious and cultural heritage. We urge the Russian Federation to comply with its obligations under international law, including international human rights law and international humanitarian law. We remain firm in our position that those who have committed crimes must be held accountable.

In conclusion, we once again urge the Russian Federation to immediately cease its aggression and unconditionally completely withdraw all its forces and military equipment from the entire territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders.

Mr. De Rivière (France) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank Ms. Brands Kehris for her briefing.

Russia is once again using the Security Council as an instrument to carry out a disinformation campaign. However, it will not succeed in diverting attention from the illegal war of aggression it is waging against Ukraine, nor cause us to forget the countless violations of international law it is committing in that respect.

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, established by the Human Rights Council, recalled in October, in its most recent report (A/78/540), that the Russian authorities had committed violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law and committed crimes in the areas of Ukraine they illegally occupy. Russia has targeted, in indiscriminate attacks, civilians and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine, including religious sites. According to UNESCO, more than 100 religious buildings have been damaged since 24 February 2022.

In July, Russian strikes on Odesa caused serious damage to the Transfiguration Cathedral and Odesa's historic city centre, which was recognized as a World Heritage Site in January. France urges Russia to comply with resolution 2347 (2017), which states that directing attacks against religious buildings is a war crime. In the territories it illegally occupies, such as Crimea, Russia tramples the rights of Crimean Tatars, Protestants and members of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which was recognized as an autocephalous church in 2018.

France welcomes the work carried out by Ukrainian and international courts and investigative mechanisms to document those violations. We reaffirm our support for the investigations being carried out by the Ukrainian courts and the International Criminal Court. I also reiterate my country's commitment to freedom of religion and belief and all other fundamental rights and freedoms, which are guaranteed in particular by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

France will continue to support Ukraine in its legitimate defence of its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. We once again call on Russia to stop its aggression and withdraw its troops from the

territory of Ukraine, as ordered on 16 March 2022 by the International Court of Justice. That is the only way to ensure the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine. That is the one and only basis on which a just and lasting peace can be established in the country.

Mr. Wood (United States of America): I thank the Assistant Secretary-General for her briefing today. We note that the Russian Federation invited an official from Moscow's Patriarchate to brief the Security Council today about the religious-freedom situation in another Member State. We also take note of Russia's change of position with regard to discussing the issue of human rights in the Security Council.

The United States takes seriously all allegations of violations of human rights, including the freedom of religion or belief, and we expect all Governments to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms. However, the Kremlin's transparent use of the Council as a stage for its disinformation is further evidence of its insincerity in combating the very real issue of lack of respect for freedom of religion or belief in many places around the world. Russia's overwhelming damage to religious sites, including the Ukrainian Orthodox churches it purports to support, coupled with its abysmal religious-freedom record at home, demonstrates how little it actually values religious freedom.

It is alarming that Russia is trying to justify its atrocities and other abuses by framing its war of aggression as a holy war between good and evil, in addition to promoting the phony pretence of de-Nazification of Ukraine. We should all see through that facade and focus on the well-documented and systematic policy of religious oppression in the territories under Russia's occupation. Since Russia's invasion in 2014, its war of aggression has included repression of beliefs against Muslims, Jews, Orthodox, Catholics, evangelicals and other religious groups.

We are concerned about reports that Russia's occupation authorities continue to detain and physically abuse, torture and imprison individuals on the basis of their religious beliefs or affiliations, and to baselessly apply extremist, terrorist or undesirable designations against religious groups. Bishop Ivan Rusyn of the Ukrainian evangelical church has publicly mourned the killing of his church pastors, noting that in Russia-occupied areas, the church has been forced underground. His plea was simple: please hear our cry.

We must all hear it. We must all look past Russia's disingenuous claims today to the facts in the many well-documented reports, including about how Russia's relentless bombings and missile strikes have hit places of worship and other religious sites. Early this month, UNESCO reported it had verified damage to 124 religious sites in Ukraine, in addition to other cultural sites. The Ukrainian organization Heritage Emergency Response Initiative puts the total closer to 700.

Russia's occupation authorities reportedly continued to employ tactics such as torture, unjust detentions, threats of rape and other forms of repression against members of the clergy and persons of faith. We stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine, including every member of its diverse religious communities, in every corner of the country, and everyone who heroically resists Russia's invasion. We support the full realization of the right to freedom of religion and belief everywhere and for everyone.

As Russia's aggression against Ukraine continues, the Kremlin seeks to exacerbate divisions within the Orthodox church and weaponize the faith of those Ukrainian citizens who belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Today we see another example of Russia's attempts to deflect attention from the atrocities it is committing in Ukraine and its abuses against its own people. We urge the Kremlin to cease this senseless war of choice and respect the human rights of all.

Mr. Anyanah (Ghana): I would like to begin by thanking Ms. Brands Kehris for her briefing, and I also thank the additional briefer for sharing his views with the Security Council.

We have listened carefully and observed with much concern the progressive degeneration of the religious fabric of Ukraine's society. Of the many tragedies of war among nations is the tendency for conflicts to transcend beyond hard-power questions into the religious, cultural and social forces of society and the core of people's humanity, shattering their lives. We remain convinced of the need to end the war now and create the conditions for addressing the several root causes and other instigating factors of the war, including religious tensions, which predate the current hostilities.

My delegation continues to hold the view that the Human Rights Council remains the appropriate international forum for the redress of all forms of human rights violations, including the assertions of religious persecution targeted at the Orthodox church

in Ukraine. We therefore approach today's meeting from the standpoint of our vested interest in a peaceful and comprehensive resolution of the conflict and would like to reiterate the following four key points.

First, we reiterate our call on the conflicting parties to uphold their commitments under international law, to respect the rights of all persons to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as the right to manifest such religion. Religious rights and freedoms are universally recognized as inherent human rights and therefore codified across a wide number of international instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. We believe that upholding religious rights and freedoms contributes to peaceful and inclusive societies at the national and international levels and should be promoted at all times.

Secondly, we underscore the legal and moral mandate of political and religious authorities to promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence among the various religious sects. We are of the view that hate speech, discriminatory actions, the destruction of cultural heritage, including religious sites, and political subversion on religious grounds must be replaced by devout manifestation of religious tolerance, a culture of peace, mutual respect, stability and restoration and reconstruction following the desolation of war.

Thirdly, we reiterate the call for constructive dialogue in good faith among all stakeholders to find mutually agreeable solutions to the deep divisions caused by divergences surrounding the Orthodox Church. Such efforts must seek to address the conundrum of religious tensions, as both a causative factor and a consequence of the war, and must be aimed at supporting broader peace efforts.

Finally, we stress the urgency of an immediate and unconditional cessation of hostilities in Ukraine and once again encourage the support of the international community to facilitate, through diplomacy and dialogue, a peaceful, just and comprehensive resolution, based on the principles of international law and the values and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations.

Mr. Moretti (Brazil): I thank Assistant Secretary-General Ilze Brands Kehris for her briefing and Mr. Vakhtang Kipshidze for his remarks.

I also welcome the representative of Ukraine to today's meeting.

Brazil attaches great importance to the freedom of religion or belief, without discrimination. It 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.

As a pluralistic and multi-ethnic society, Brazil encourages tolerance and respect for religious diversity. Under no circumstances should religious practice foment tensions within or between countries. We take note of recent decisions that may affect the legal status of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. We call on all parties involved to avoid any measures that could restrict individual freedoms or deepen resentment that fuels conflict.

It would be regrettable if the deep, historical ties between the Orthodox communities in Russia and Ukraine fell victim to the dynamics of war. On the contrary, the shared Orthodox faith, as a constituent part of their national identities, should foster dialogue.

As expressed on many previous occasions, Brazil supports a peaceful solution to the conflict, in accordance with Article 33 of the Charter of the United Nations, and is willing to contribute to efforts to restore peace as soon as the parties are ready to engage in negotiations. We reiterate our firm commitment to just and lasting peace, based on the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter and the legitimate security concerns of all parties.

Ms. Matar (United Arab Emirates) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to thank Ms. Brands Kehris for her briefing. We also took note of Mr. Kipshidze's briefing.

The United Arab Emirates believes in the importance of promoting tolerance, peaceful coexistence and respect for cultures and religions. Our region has suffered from the consequences of intolerance, extremism and incitement to hatred and violence based on religion or race. In the context of today's discussion, we express our deep concern about

any reports of religious intolerance. As recognized by the Security Council in resolution 2686 (2023), intolerance can contribute to the outbreak, escalation and recurrence of conflict. We must therefore reject hatred before and during the outbreak of any conflict.

We are also concerned about ongoing damage to cultural sites during the war in Ukraine. Since February, UNESCO has verified damage to more than 300 cultural sites, including 124 religious sites and 142 buildings of historical and artistic significance. The destruction of cultural buildings undermines one of the key pillars of mutual understanding. Cultural sites, including historic sites and places of worship, are protected under international humanitarian law, including article 53 of the first Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions. In resolution 2347 (2017), the Security Council further underlined that the destruction of cultural heritage, including religious sites, can exacerbate conflict and hamper reconciliation efforts. Therefore, one of our top priorities must be to strive to protect cultural heritage sites during conflict and to restore and rebuild such sites when peace is achieved. Religious and cultural sites are very important for their communities, in particular amid the upheaval of conflict. Furthermore, they are important for post-conflict recovery and reconstruction.

Creating a culture of tolerance is a core element of conflict resolution and post-war recovery efforts and must be an important consideration for the Security Council and the parties to the conflict. As the Council has confirmed, religious leaders play a key role in establishing and consolidating peaceful coexistence among communities and in conflict prevention and resolution. Constructive engagement by religious leaders can strengthen community resilience and build the foundation for peace.

In conclusion, intolerance and destruction of religious and cultural sites serve only to escalate and prolong conflicts. We must therefore be unequivocal in our condemnation of such acts and focus our efforts on restoring peace and security in Ukraine. On our part, the United Arab Emirates remains resolute in its support for all serious efforts to achieve just and sustainable peace, based on the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, while respecting Ukraine's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity.

Ms. Dautllari (Albania): We thank Assistant Secretary-General Kehris for her briefing.

Russia's unprovoked military aggression against Ukraine has not stopped, and neither has the misuse of the Security Council with meetings such as this one called by Russia on issues of choice to advance a narrative in support of its illegal actions in Ukraine.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts that everyone has the right to the freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Albania upholds the principle of the freedom of religion and belief, at home and worldwide. As a nation proud of its religious coexistence, we firmly believe that religious leaders, regardless of their faith, denomination or location, should actively contribute to peace, social cohesion and coexistence.

Efforts to instrumentalize religion or use it for political goals is an adventurous enterprise and may prove dangerous. Mixing religion and politics can lead to challenges and tensions, especially in diverse societies in which various religious beliefs coexist. Regrettably, we have become accustomed to witnessing Russian propaganda exploit religion to legitimize its geopolitical ambitions, transforming religious tenets into power tactics to advance its agenda.

We strongly maintain that politics and religion should be kept separate. The political establishment must refrain from instrumentalizing religious leaders, just as religious leaders should avoid extending their influence in matters that are not of their purview. We expect religious leaders to work for peace and understanding, promote respect among people and nations, uphold the values of friendship and cooperation with neighbours and not to support actions that are against peace and that violate the Charter of the United Nations, or those committing crimes, displacing millions, causing the loss of thousands of innocent lives and separating children from their parents and relatives.

In conclusion, we reiterate our call on Russia to stop the war and withdraw all its troops from the internationally recognized borders of Ukraine.

The President (*spoke in Chinese*): I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of China.

I listened closely to the briefers. Religion is an important part of human civilization and an important embodiment of the culture. When different religions exist within countries, peaceful coexistence, interaction, exchanges and dialogue among them

are conducive to the social cohesion and diversity of civilizations. However, if they are not handled properly, religious issues can easily create divisions, exacerbate disagreements and even lead to confrontation and conflict. China has always believed that different religions and religious factions need to respect one another, strengthen their exchanges and promote understanding if they are to play a positive role in easing tensions and maintaining peace.

The Ukraine crisis has continued to drag on to this day, and endless problems have emerged in all of its aspects. The confrontation and conflict among religions, cultures and societies have become more acute. The parties concerned should remain highly sensitive to that, make every effort to prevent a further spillover of negative effects and refrain from deliberately inciting hatred and manufacturing new conflicts. China's position on the Ukraine issue has been consistent. We have always stood for peace and dialogue. I want to reiterate that dialogue and negotiation are key to reaching a political solution to the Ukraine crisis. The parties to the conflict should remain rational, exercise restraint, respond constructively to the international community's calls for peace and implement a ceasefire and a cessation of hostilities without delay. During that process, we hope that religion can be a positive force in promoting peace and unity. China will maintain its exchanges and engagement with all the parties and make continued efforts to facilitate a political solution to the Ukraine issue.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

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

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): I want to thank all the members of the Security Council who have called for respect for freedom of speech in Ukraine. I would like to say to our Western colleagues — who have no interest in facts — that now that they have read out their standard and clichéd statements saying that Ukraine can do whatever it wants, including destroy churches, that they consult the Internet and watch the hundreds of videos of churches closing and clergy and parishioners of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church being beaten. Listen to the statement by the monks of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra. They should familiarize themselves with it and compare it to their own statements. Perhaps they will then realize that

those statements are abetting and justifying the crimes of the Kyiv regime.

We are not talking about Russia here but about ordinary Ukrainians who have fallen under the yoke of Zelenskyy's repressive machine. Of course, we did not expect to hear an in-depth understanding of the problem we are discussing on the part of certain Council members. They have neither the real understanding nor the political ability to rise above the positions that they have taken in support their pro-Kyiv attitudes or to realize the degree to which the regime they are unconditionally defending wants nothing to do with the values that they claim to defend. The topic we have proposed is not about discussions on human rights in the Security Council, despite the fact that Western representatives have sarcastically welcomed it as such. It is an issue of security measures, because the fact that it has not been resolved means that it can lead to consequences that they are incapable, or nearly incapable, of imagining, just as they were unable to foresee the consequences of decades of violations of the Palestinians' rights in the occupied territories. We ceased to be shocked by their short-sightedness long ago, unfortunately.

The President (*spoke in Chinese*): I now give the floor to the representative of Ukraine.

Mrs. Mudrenko (Ukraine) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank you, Sir, for your skilful leadership of the Security Council.

(*spoke in English*)

I also recognize Putin's envoy in the permanent seat of the Soviet Union. We thank Assistant Secretary-General Kehris for her comprehensive briefing. We note that the briefing formally raised a topic related to human rights at this meeting of the Security Council. While we, together with other democratic nations, believe that human rights issues should be an indispensable element on the Council's agenda, we might even have welcomed that step. However, we all know that Russia only remembers human rights when it needs to wrap up its propaganda in a presentable way. It is not surprising that Moscow has once again used the Council as a platform to promote the interests of the Russian Orthodox Church — the de facto State church in Russia. Since the beginning of the invasion, that institution has effectively been responsible for providing ideological support to the aggression, and its leader, Kirill Gundyayev, has translated military propaganda

narratives that align with those of the Kremlin. When Russia mobilized in September 2022 after its defeat in the Kharkiv region, Kirill immediately incorporated relevant propaganda lines into his sermons. That is how he instilled in his flock the belief that waging war against Ukraine is a godly task, as he conveyed in a sermon in September 2022, in which he said,

“If someone driven by a sense of duty and compelled to fulfil an oath remains true to their calling and perishes in the performance of military duty, then they unquestionably commit an act equivalent to sacrifice. They sacrifice themselves for others. We therefore believe that this sacrifice washes away all the sins a person may have committed.”

We must acknowledge that the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church is quite honest in his assessment of his institution's role in the war of aggression. He wastes no time preaching about peace or referring to biblical commandments like “Thou shalt not kill.” He plainly says,

“Today we need everyone to be mobilized — the military, political forces and, of course, the Church must be mobilized, first and foremost, to pray for our authorities and the military, but also to be there on the front line.”

It is therefore not surprising that priests who try to emphasize peace as a primary value become targets of internal Church repression. For example, in February Kirill banned a Moscow priest, Ioann Koval, from serving because he prayed not for victory but for peace. The Russian Orthodox Church itself has played its part in the occupation and has pursued annexation. In 2022 it effectively annexed all three Crimean dioceses of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the cities of Dzhankoy, Simferopol and Feodosia. In July 2023 the Moscow Patriarchate stole three other dioceses of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, in Luhansk, Alchevsk and Rovenki, in the occupied part of the Luhansk region of Ukraine.

I would like to point out that those actions were taken against the very Church whose rights the Russian delegation has pretended to protect by requesting this meeting. And that is yet another example of how far Russia's claims of protection are from reality. It claims that it is protecting the population of Donbas, but in reality it is razing cities and villages in Donbas to the ground and killing Donbas residents on an industrial scale. Russia claims that it protects the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. In reality, Russia steals its dioceses,

cathedrals and other property. That which Russia is not able to steal, it tries to destroy, as was the case on 23 July with the Transfiguration Cathedral in Odesa and with many other religious buildings throughout Ukraine. According to the most recent data, more than 500 religious sites have been damaged, 100 of which were destroyed completely.

The situation in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine remains a matter of gravest concern. Since the very beginning of the Russian aggression in 2014, Russia's authorities in those territories have harassed, intimidated, prosecuted or imprisoned hundreds of those belonging to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Protestant churches, Muslim religious communities, Greek Catholics, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses and members of other religious groups. The religious sites of those religious minorities have been demolished or their communities evicted from the buildings. The reports of the Secretary-General, as well as annual General Assembly resolutions, consistently highlight the dire human rights situation, including in the religious sphere, in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, including the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol.

The aggressor has extended to the occupied territories those repressive practices that have long existed in Russia. For instance, the so-called Yarovaya law has been extensively used since 2016 for the persecution on the basis of religious beliefs of individuals and communities under the pretext of counter-terrorism. Religious groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslim communities and various Protestant congregations, have been given the blanket label of extremists or terrorists.

There have been references today to Ukraine's draft law 8371. It has a very clear goal, namely, to counter the attempts of the aggressor State to instrumentalize religious organizations in Ukraine for the purposes of its aggression. To that end, if adopted, the draft law will disallow the activities of those religious organizations in Ukraine affiliated with the main bodies in the aggressor country. If such an affiliation is established by a special governmental institution responsible for State policy in the sphere of religion, an order will be issued to rectify the situation. Only if the order is not implemented will the court then decide whether or not to allow the activities of a religious organization. That means that all those religious organizations whose affiliation with an aggressor State is not established by the court will be able to continue their activities freely.

My delegation reiterates that the Security Council would only benefit from a return to the practice of the discussion of the human rights issues as a part of its agenda. That is particularly relevant in relation to the human rights situation in the aggressor State, as well as the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and its impact on the human rights situation in my country, especially in the temporarily occupied territories.

The President (*spoke in Chinese*): The representative of the Russian Federation has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): I would like to thank the representative of Ukraine for her direct and indirect confirmation of our premise that the Kyiv regime is fighting specifically against canonical orthodoxy in Ukraine. We also heard a vivid example of the promotion of hate speech in this Chamber.

The meeting rose at 11.35 a.m.