

# CYPRUS

For several years, USCIRF has monitored religious freedom conditions in Cyprus, reporting only on the northern region since 2011, in accordance with U.S. House Resolution 1631 that called on USCIRF “to investigate and make recommendations on violations of religious freedom in the areas of northern Cyprus under control of the Turkish military.” However, recent efforts by the United Nations and the Swedish government have led to notable improvements regarding religious freedom and bi-communal harmony. A UN-backed Swedish initiative brought together the Republic of Cyprus government, Turkish Cypriot authorities, Archbishop Chrysostomos II, and Grand Mufti Dr. Talip Atalay to advance inter-faith understanding, religious freedom, and access to religious sites.

## **Eased Movement of Religious Leaders and Laity**

In October 2013, longstanding restrictions were lifted that prevented the Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus in the south and the Muslim Grand Mufti in the north from crossing the Green Line. The Archbishop led two services at Apostolos Andreas Monastery in the northern part of Cyprus, attended by 5,000 Greek Cypriots from the area under the effective control of the government of the Republic of Cyprus, and the Grand Mufti led a service at the Hala Sultan Tekke mosque in the government-controlled area, attended by hundreds of northern Turkish Cypriot Muslims. In February 2014, after the first-ever joint statement by the island’s five religious leaders (the Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus, the Grand Mufti of Cyprus, the Maronite Archbishop, the Armenian Archbishop, and the Patriarchal Latin Vicar), religious leaders and laity were permitted several more cross-area movements for worship, some for the first time since 1974. Between mid-December 2013 and late June 2014, the UN facilitated an unprecedented level of engagement, including 48 religious services and commemorative events and 98

bi-communal harmony civil society events, with more than 20,000 people crossing from both sides. In several instances, the Greek Orthodox Archbishop and the Muslim Grand Mufti participated in religious events and

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ceremonies together, further strengthening religious and bi-communal harmony.

Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots indigenous to the island can generally cross the Green Line with no approval process needed. Nevertheless, a UN-facilitated application process to visit religious sites is required on occasion, and reports continue that individuals or groups still are periodically restricted from crossing the Green Line. Under European and Republic of Cyprus national law, however, Turkish settlers and other persons without proper documentation cannot cross into the government-controlled areas. The Grand Mufti, not being a citizen of the Republic of Cyprus, is subject to these regulations; however, as noted above the Republic of Cyprus did make exceptions for him in the last year.

## **Access to Houses of Worship**

While there have been improvements in north-south relations relating to religious freedom, access to houses of worship remains a work in progress. Since USCIRF’s February 2011 visit, an increasing number of Christian religious services were successfully conducted in places of worship in the Turkish-occupied part of the Republic of Cyprus.

Between January 2013 and May 2014, the Republic of Cyprus reported to USCIRF that Turkish Cypriot authorities rejected 15 applications for permission for services in the north. For the same period, representatives of Turkish Cypriot authorities based in Washington, DC reported to USCIRF that the north approved 33 applications. In addition, between January 2013 and May 2014 the Republic of Cyprus reported to USCIRF that the Turkish military denied two applications for access to religious sites located in Turkish military bases or zones. For the same period, representatives of Turkish Cypriot authorities based in Washington, DC reported to USCIRF that 17 such applications were approved. In the government-controlled Republic of Cyprus, all but two mosques are open only on Fridays and cannot be accessed for worship or repair work on other days. The two mosques in Larnaca and Limassol are open on weekdays during regular business hours, making two of the five required prayers for Muslims impossible. In the north, religious minority communities must seek permission to worship in churches other than eight that require no such permission. The application process in the north was eased following USCIRF's 2011 visit to the island.

### **Official Discrimination and Harassment**

In the Turkish-occupied part of Cyprus, plain-clothed police monitor, videotape, or question religious minorities regularly, including at their houses of worship, although USCIRF is not aware of individuals being detained or arrested. Reportedly, officials in the south frequently harass and discriminate against individuals thought to be non-Greek Orthodox, including those attending mosques. Small religious communities in the south, such as Buddhists, Baha'is, and Jehovah's Witnesses have faced problems securing licenses to build places of worship. Additionally, there are reports that textbooks originating from both the north and the south include negative information about each other's religious community. In the south, non-Greek Orthodox students may be exempted from religious classes, but reportedly some who opt out experience social harassment. In the north, religious education is required and there is no exemption allowance; therefore minority religious communities run their own schools, largely out of homes. There also have been some reports, including by Amnesty International, of the Republic of Cyprus

detaining or deporting asylum seekers fleeing religious persecution, including Baha'is from Iran.

### **Religious and Cultural Heritage**

Many of the 500-plus churches and cemeteries in the north have been or are nearly destroyed from years of neglect or intentional damage by the Turkish military, looters of priceless religious artifacts, and desecrators. Some churches now are used as mosques, community halls, sporting venues, stables for animals, or storage. In the south, dozens of mosques are also in extremely poor condition from neglect or intentional damage. Under UN auspices, the joint Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage reached an agreement in 2012 on restoring and repairing a number of churches in the north and mosques in the south. Notably, at least two mosques in the south and four churches in the north have been restored. Additionally, the restoration of Apostolos Andreas Monastery has begun, with completion slated for April 2016.

### **Recommendations**

The Swedish initiative presents a unique opportunity to address longstanding issues impacting religious freedom and bi-communal harmony. The U.S. government should urge the Republic of Cyprus and Turkish Cypriot authorities to: implement the recommendations suggested by the United Nations and the Swedish embassy, including creating and/or expanding bi-communal harmony dialogues among political officials, religious leaders and laity, and civil society in both the north and the south; while respecting Republic of Cyprus national legislation and EU regulations, remove any restrictions on religious leaders and laity crossing the Green Line for religious worship or to visit religious sites; permit unrestricted access to houses of worship; train teachers on religious and cultural sensitivities; ensure that textbooks do not contain negative information about religious groups; and eliminate official harassment or discrimination towards religious minority communities in the north and the south, including those communities not considered native to the island.