

PROGRESS OF DELIBERATIONS AT GREEK FOREIGN MINISTRY'S PEACE CONFERENCE (PART I)

The deliberations of the Foreign Ministry's Conference on Peace began on Monday, the 6th/19th of October 2015. The President of the Hellenic Republic Mr Prokopis Pavlopoulos, opened the Conference by stressing that it takes place at a crucial time, because of unprecedented incidents of violence in the Middle East, the cradle and origins of cultural diversity, now turned into a volcano of violence threatening to erupt at any time.

"The Greek-Hellenistic civilisation and Orthodoxy", Mr Pavlopoulos said, "have contributed to the cultural heritage of the Middle East, and this is why the Middle East should become once more a cradle of coexistence between religions and peoples. Therefore, this Conference organized by the Greek Foreign Ministry marks a momentous time. The quintessence of your mission as clerics is enclosed in the Gospel, particularly in Matthew, Chapter 5, stating that *blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God*. With this in mind, I piously urge you, as religious leaders, to teach us tolerance and love. Your mission encloses two factors, man and peace. The Cavern and the Manger in Bethlehem that received our Lord Jesus Christ Incarnate cannot be converted into a volcanic Middle East in the throes of conflagration".

The Greek President went on to extend thanks to all participants, especially the "pioneer of green civilisation", as he called the Ecumenical Patriarch, and the Foreign Minister, Mr Kotzias.

Mr Kotzias then took the floor and went on to refer to the

coexistence of cultures in the Middle East through the ages, which should also be the case today, in order to put an end to the destruction of human lives and ancient cultural monuments. He spoke of the collaboration between Churches in the Middle East as examples of peace and said that human rights must be protected. The Minister added that the establishment of an Observatory and a solution to the Palestinian question that secures the safety of the state of Israel and of the Palestinians is a priority. He suggested that the forced movement of people must be punished. Greece promotes a multidimensional policy, the political solution of the Cyprus question and the political solution of the refugee problem. It supports a solution to the Cyprus problem that includes the withdrawal of the occupying army and the coexistence of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. In Ukraine, Syria and Iraq, Greece promotes a policy of peace, justice, prosperity and coexistence. The Minister went on to add that Orthodox saints, in their holiness, defended man and the human dignity. Greece asks for a solution to the refugee problem in collaboration with the Balkan countries and other countries of the European Union. He warmly thanked Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens for the help offered to refugees by the Archbishopric of Athens and the Church of Greece, adding that in terms of geography and culture, Greece is a bridge between three continents. "Our message is the coexistence of different attitudes, convictions and religious faiths. We are taught by tradition. We promote the establishment of an international Observatory to prevent and combat crimes committed against man and civilisations".

His Holiness Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarchate, then spoke, stressing that the Ecumenical Patriarchate has respected religious diversity, freedom and the fact that three monotheistic religions have developed in the Middle East. "Religion", His Holiness said, "was never an obstacle to human coexistence. In order to overcome obstacles, we need to discover the value of peace, which comes from a revision of diversity. Certain extremist groups promote the distortion of

Islam through murdering human beings and destroying century-long monuments. We recommend an interreligious dialogue. The Ecumenical Patriarchate has, years ago, initiated an interreligious dialogue with Judaism and Islam. We support interreligious dialogue as a means of fighting against crimes committed in the name of religion. We recommend the continuance of actions for the protection of the natural environment and of religion. We recommend the intensification of the workings of the Middle East Council of Churches. Unfortunately, in our days, thousands of human beings of all religions are being persecuted and expatriated from the Middle East".

Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens took the floor next, to underline the imperative need to show our support to refugees, in accordance not only to the principles of the Gospel, but also in line with the principles of humanity. The Middle East remains a bleeding wound. The tragedy of the refugees has spread across the Mediterranean and the whole of Europe. He then pointed out that refugees are created by us and then led as sheep to the slaughter.

Archbishop Ieronymos was followed by the Cypriot Foreign Minister, Mr Kasoulides, who stressed that the Republic of Cyprus and the Middle East had always been a cradle of religions and cultures and that there is a great need to project the cultural uniqueness of the Middle East and the significance of the three monotheistic religions in the region. "There are", Mr Kasoulides said, "units of extremists, which we denounce. Fanaticism belongs to human nature, not religion. Daes have no limits, as they seek the destruction of monuments and the genocide of peoples. Cultural relics are being traded. Thousands of cultural and religious relics have been stolen and traded abroad, as was the case against the Republic of Cyprus after 1974. The cost for the return of such relics should not be borne by their owners, but by auction houses and buyers. We must establish an International Judicial

Body to deal with such cases. There is also the problem of the return of Cypriot refugees to their ancestral homes in the Northern part of Cyprus”.

From the Secretariat-General