



MEETINGS COVERAGE

United Nations

9245TH MEETING (PM)

SC/15178

17 JANUARY 2023

Concerned by Restrictions on Religious Freedom, Speakers Warn against Using Religion to Fuel Conflict, as Security Council Considers Situation in Ukraine

While stressing the importance of upholding the right to freedom of religion, speakers in the Security Council also cautioned against the dangers of using religion to fuel conflict, as they considered the situation in Ukraine.

Ilze Brands Kehris, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), drew attention to the restrictions to freedom of religion across Ukraine, both in territory controlled by the Government as well as that occupied by the Russian Federation. Highlighting the deteriorating relations between the two communities, she pointed to searches conducted in the premises of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by Ukraine's security service, criminal charges against at least three clergy and two recent draft laws that could undermine the right to freedom of religion.

Calling on both parties to ensure freedom of religion, she said the Russian Federation's armed attacks against Ukraine, including the missile strike on 14 January, have resulted in daily and severe forms of human rights violations. Noting that more than 7,000 civilians have been killed in Ukraine since 24 February 2022, she pointed out that the damage and destruction of half of the country's energy infrastructure system have also severely restricted civilians' rights to health and adequate standards of living.

Also briefing the Council today was Metropolitan of Volokolamsk Anthony, Chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Patriarchate of Moscow, who expressed grave concern regarding the rights of Orthodox believers in Ukraine. Pointing to a 2019 law aimed at changing the name of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which endeavours to separate the Church from its property and eventually fully eliminate its activities in Ukraine, he noted various incidents of increasing hostility as well as a defamatory media campaign showing clear signs of hate speech.

More recently, he said, Ukraine's National Defence and Security Council adopted several measures instructing the Government to draft a bill prohibiting the activities of churches with ties to the Russian Orthodox Church and introducing sanctions against its clergy, including one which deprives senior clergy of their Ukrainian citizenship. Such actions amount to a form of "mass political repression", he stressed.

In the ensuing debate, the representative of the Russian Federation said that Moscow will not "put up with the fact that a malicious, Russophobic, anti-Christian dictatorship is being formed on our borders". After the beginning of the special military operation, the formation of a "Zelenskyy dictatorship" rapidly gathered pace, he said, adding that political opponents and independent journalists were persecuted and draconian laws were adopted. Kyiv's war against canonical Orthodoxy, which has the support of its Western backers, has brought the country steps away from a "fratricidal domestic religious catastrophe", he stressed.

Countering that, Ukraine's delegate stressed that everyone in his country has the right to believe in what he or she considers worthy of belief. Further, it was baffling that a foreign national and a member of a foreign religious organization was invited to brief the Council on the religious situation in Ukraine, he said. The Russian Federation tortures Orthodox Christians, imprisons Muslims, forces Protestants to flee abroad and persecutes Jehovah Witnesses, he said, adding: "Wherever Russia comes, religious freedom ends." Recalling the

missile attack in Dnipro on 14 January, which killed at least 45 people, he said the use of such powerful missiles in a densely populated residential area is a clear war crime and called on the Security Council to ensure that it does not repeat its failures in Rwanda.

The representative of the United States asked if “any informed person could take seriously Russia’s purported commitment to religious freedom in Ukraine”. Drawing attention to the damage visited by the Russian Federation on religious sites and places of worship in Ukraine and the baseless prosecution of dozens of Crimean Tatars, he said that today’s wasteful briefing is yet another cynical attempt to distract the international community with disinformation and invent justifications for its senseless, unholy war.

“The politicization of religion,” the representative of United Arab Emirates pointed out, is another sign of the damage the conflict is inflicting on Ukraine’s social fabric. Highlighting the importance of protecting the sanctity of religious sites in times of conflict, he said that while religious leaders and communities of faith can play an important role in building peace and providing comfort during war, places of worship are the centre of gravity for communities of faith and can serve as important platforms for post-war national healing. He also drew attention to the horrific human cost of the air strike in Dnipro during which 45 people were killed and called for cessation of hostilities.

Also strongly condemning recent air strikes on the town of Dnipro, France’s delegate described the current meeting as an attempt to divert the Council’s attention by exploiting freedom of religion and belief. “We will never settle for a world where force wins out over law,” he said, while the representative of Ecuador voiced alarm that the military aggression against Ukraine has resulted in the destruction of hundreds of religious sites. Per article 53 of the Additional Protocols of the Geneva Convention, he noted, acts of hostility against religious sites that represent the cultural and spiritual heritage of people are prohibited.

In the darkest days of history, Gabon’s delegate recalled, religion has been used to justify the unjustifiable. He expressed regret that both sides are honing their weapons and hardening their rhetoric. How much blood should spill before they decide to negotiate, he asked, appealing to all stakeholders to silence their guns and give diplomacy a chance.

Also speaking today were representatives of Switzerland, Malta, Albania, China, United Kingdom, Ghana, Brazil, Mozambique and Japan.

The meeting began at 3:01 p.m. and ended at 4:51 p.m.

Briefings

ILZE BRANDS KEHRIS, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), who spoke on behalf of the Commissioner, said the Russian Federation’s armed attack against Ukraine has brought the most severe forms of human rights violations into the everyday lives of people in Ukraine. OHCHR has recorded more than 7,000 civilians killed since 24 February 2022, she said, adding that the actual figures are considerably higher. Highlighting the 14 January missile attack, which struck a residential building, as one of the deadliest so far, she recalled the 45 civilians it killed, including six children. Strikes targeting critical infrastructure in Ukraine have now killed at least 103 civilians and have damaged or destroyed half of the country’s energy infrastructure system. Underscoring that restricting civilians’ access to water, electricity and essential communications affects their rights to health and to adequate standards of living, she said that international humanitarian law requires the protection of children “as persons who are particularly vulnerable.”

Expressing particular concern regarding restrictions to freedom of religion across Ukraine, both in territory controlled by the Government as well as that occupied by the Russian Federation, she added that while tensions between both communities in Ukraine existed for decades, they have further deteriorated following the Russian Federation’s armed attack. In November and December, the security service of Ukraine conducted searches in the premises and places of worship of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and at least three clergy are now facing criminal charges. Urging Ukraine’s authorities to ensure that any such searches are in full compliance with international law, she added that fair trial rights must be given to those facing criminal charges. Highlighting two recent draft laws that could undermine the right to freedom of religion or belief, she cited international human rights law and called on both parties to ensure that the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and religion can be exercised without discrimination.

METROPOLITAN OF VOLOKOLAMSK ANTHONY, Chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Patriarchate of Moscow, said the Russian Orthodox Church — in cooperation with other denominations in the region and around the world — does everything it can to defend the rights of the faithful, especially Christians. It is currently gravely concerned with the rights of Orthodox

believers in Ukraine, he said, outlining the important cultural and religious ties between Ukrainians and Russians and emphasizing that attempts have long been under way to destroy those bonds. Most recently, Ukraine's National Defence and Security Council adopted several measures instructing the Government to draft a bill prohibiting the activities of churches with ties to the Russian Orthodox Church, even those that are fully headquartered in Ukraine. It also called for the introduction of "so-called sanctions" against clergy, he said, a decision which was subsequently affirmed by Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Among those measures is one aimed at depriving senior clergy of their Ukrainian citizenship, a move which is likely to be used to justify their ultimate expulsion from the country.

Noting that the Constitution of Ukraine prohibits discrimination on religious or ethnic grounds, he said such measures are being applied solely to the clergy of one specific faith, the Orthodox Church. As such, those actions amount to a form of "mass political repression" in contravention of both the Ukrainian Constitution and international agreements signed by Ukraine, he said, adding that the latter's Security Service has also conducted mass raids of churches and related facilities, based on little or no evidence. Those most recent acts are only a continuation of Ukraine's increasing hostility over recent years. In 2019, several new religious legal norms were introduced which led to seizures and raids of Church property, as well as the beating of parishioners and clergy. That same year, a law was adopted aimed at changing the name of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, with the obvious aim of legally separating the Church from its property and eventually fully eliminating its activities in Ukraine. Meanwhile, he said, a defamatory media campaign continues against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which bears clear signs of hate speech and has resulted in numerous cases of arson, vandalism and even violence against Church members and clergy.

Statements

VASSILY A. NEBENZIA (Russian Federation), stating that matters concerning the protection of human rights do not fall under the Council's purview, said that the subject of today's meeting is not human rights. Rather, it is the Kyiv regime's latest provocative actions, which make the possibility of peaceful settlement even more remote. An authoritarian, despotic regime is being formed, and persecution of dissent is being carried out on all fronts. Emphasizing that this "tightening of the screws" did not start today or in February of 2022, he said that the regime has been, since 2014, steadily destroying anything that would possibly link it to the Russian Federation. Such measures contradict Ukraine's obligations to protect the rights of all ethnic groups pursuant to the national Constitution and various international conventions. He went on to say that, after the beginning of the special military operation, the formation of a "Zelenskyy dictatorship" rapidly gathered pace as political opponents and independent journalists were persecuted and, in just a few months, all opposition parties in favour of developing normal relations between Ukraine and the Russian Federation were shut down.

In territory controlled by the Zelenskyy regime, he said, there is mass political repression and arrests of human-rights defenders. Further, under the pretext of war with the occupiers, the Ukrainian authorities adopted draconian laws and purged the media space of alternative points of view. The latest of Kyiv's repressive policies is its war against canonical Orthodoxy, which has brought Ukraine to the brink of a large-scale interreligious conflict. Long ago, Kyiv — with the support of its Western backers — decided to undermine the canonical Orthodox Church in Ukraine and, now, the country is steps away from a "fratricidal domestic religious catastrophe", he stressed. He then asked Kyiv's Western backers — who claim to support human rights and the freedom of religion — how long they plan to ignore the formation of an inhumane dictatorship in Ukraine. He added that, while the Russian Federation will not aim — and has never aimed — to destroy Ukraine as a State, Moscow will not "put up with the fact that a malicious, Russophobic, anti-Christian dictatorship is being formed on our borders".

PASCALE CHRISTINE BAERISWYL (Switzerland) condemned the attack in Dnipro, during which a residential building was largely destroyed, as well as the shelling of the city of Kherson, which damaged the building of the Ukrainian Red Cross. "This is not only an attack on a humanitarian actor but also on the rights of people affected by conflict to receive assistance and protection," she underscored, noting that intentionally directing attacks against civilians or civilian objects constitutes a war crime. The principles of proportionality and precaution must also be respected, she asserted. She also expressed concern about the serious human rights violations committed in Ukraine during this war, including summary executions, arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances, torture and conflict-related sexual violence. With regard to freedom of religion and belief, she opposed the spread and dissemination of hate speech and any other form of religious-based discrimination. She called on the Russian Federation to de-escalate the situation and withdraw its troops without delay.

MOHAMED ISSA ABUSHAHAB (United Arab Emirates), stressing the need to ensure that different faith communities can live together peacefully, voiced concern over the distressing recent events in Ukraine. "The politicization of religion is another sign of the damage the conflict is inflicting on the country's social fabric," he said, highlighting the importance of protecting the sanctity of religious sites in times of conflict. Places of worship are the centre of gravity for communities of faith and can serve as important platforms for post-war national healing. As the conflict continues, there are fewer and fewer areas of life in Ukraine that remain unaffected. Religious leaders and

communities of faith can play an important role in building peace and providing comfort in times of war. The horrific human cost of the airstrike in Dnipro on 14 January — during which 45 people were reportedly killed — underscores the scale of the tragedy unfolding in Ukraine, he said, urging the parties to abide by international law and calling for cessation of hostilities throughout the country.

NICOLAS DE RIVIÈRE ([France](#)) said the Russian Federation is again attempting to divert the Council's attention by exploiting freedom of religion and belief. Strongly condemning Moscow's recent airstrikes on the town of Dnipro, he described today's meeting as yet another example of the Russian Federation's cynical misinformation strategy, namely claiming to defend "religious freedom" even as it openly defies a ceasefire and civilians continue to suffer. Since the beginning of the aggression against Ukraine, the Russian Federation has continued to commit serious human rights violations, including forced displacement, sexual violence, deprivation of the right to freely practice religion, and crimes against children. Against that backdrop, he voiced France's steadfast support for Ukraine, declaring: "We will never settle for a world where force wins out over law."

VANESSA FRAZIER ([Malta](#)) observed that today's meeting was requested by the Russian Federation in an attempt to shift focus from the crucial issues discussed in the Council on 13 January, such as the humanitarian catastrophe faced by the people of Ukraine. Against that backdrop, she condemned the dissemination of disinformation and misinformation by Russian media and religious leaders to justify Moscow's war against Ukraine, along with the destruction of Ukrainian historical and spiritual heritage sites in Bucha, Irpin, Mariupol and Kharkiv. Pointing out that missile strikes on Ukraine have continued unabated — some of which have targeted residential buildings — she said that these have been coupled with increasing humanitarian needs brought about by winter and attacks on critical civilian infrastructure. International humanitarian and human-rights law must be respected, and the only way to protect the rights of all individuals is to stop the war. She therefore called on the Russian Federation to stop the war, withdraw its military forces from the entire territory of Ukraine and turn to dialogue and diplomacy.

FERIT HOXHA ([Albania](#)) described the lack of respect for human rights as the primary source of violence and conflict. The brutal strike in Dnipro — reportedly by modern missiles — ended the lives of 44 innocent civilians, he said, pointing to 7,000 civilians already killed by the Russian Federation's forces during this war. He lamented that Moscow proliferates unnecessary meetings to burden the Council. Meanwhile, severe damage has been inflicted on the cultural heritage in Ukraine by the war. Since February 2022, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has verified damage to 235 sites, among them 104 religious sites. Pointing to several meetings that Moscow called on the non-existent laboratories for biological weapons, he said "this time, it is religion". Underscoring the crucial importance of the enjoyment of human rights by everyone, everywhere, he noted that religious leaders should work for peace and avoid weaponization of religion.

HERNÁN PÉREZ LOOSE ([Ecuador](#)) reiterated that the members of the Council should be the first to respect and defend the United Nations Charter. While underscoring the importance of freedom of religion, he also expressed concern about the exploitation of religion to fuel conflicts. Voicing alarm that the military aggression against Ukraine has resulted in the destruction of hundreds of religious sites, he cited the Additional Protocols of the Geneva Convention, noting that article 53 prohibits acts of hostility against religious sites that represent the cultural and spiritual heritage of people. Regretting that, despite the announced possible cessation of hostilities during Orthodox Christmas, attacks continued in that time frame, he also condemned the attacks of this weekend, which have increased the toll of destruction and death this conflict has brought in its wake.

DAI BING ([China](#)) said religious issues in a conflict situation are often complex, and if not handled properly they can prove unhelpful to achieving a peaceful resolution. Mutual respect must be fostered, and a culture of peace should be supported. Since the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine, confrontations between cultures have been deepening. Dialogue and negotiation are the only feasible paths to resolving the crisis, he said, urging all parties to exercise rationality and restraint. For its part, the international community should focus on promoting dialogue, and any incitement to hatred must be rejected. At last week's Council meeting on Ukraine, many countries stressed that 2023 should be a year of peace — a goal which China strongly shares. To that end, he vowed that his country will continue to embrace an objective and impartial position on the conflict in Ukraine.

RICHARD M. MILLS JR. ([United States](#)), while stressing his country takes violations of human rights seriously, asked if "any informed person could take seriously Russia's purported commitment to religious freedom in Ukraine". Today's meeting is another cynical attempt by the Russian Federation to invent justifications for its senseless, unholy war, and the Council has heard no shortage of excuses from the Russian delegation on why Moscow's brutal invasion is supposedly righteous. He suggested that those present consider the appalling damage visited by the Russian Federation on religious sites and places of worship in Ukraine, despite the former's stated concern about religious freedom. Further, since 2014, that country has prosecuted dozens of Crimean Tatars in a manner that independent observers have characterized as "baseless", he stressed. He therefore urged the Kremlin to respect the human rights of all and the safety of Ukraine's civilian population, including members of all religious communities. "All have witnessed Russia's playbook,"

he added. First, it wreaks death and destruction in Ukraine — freezing and starving its people, forcing them from their homes, driving them across Europe and around the world and driving up energy, food and other household costs. Then, it distracts the international community with disinformation, such as today's wasteful briefing. Against that backdrop, he urged those present and those watching to reject the Russian Federation's attempts to "create false equivalencies".

JAMES KARIUKI ([United Kingdom](#)) condemned Moscow's campaign of persecution against communities in Ukraine and the Russian Federation based on their religion or belief. He further condemned the destruction of over 100 religious sites resulting from Moscow's war in Ukraine, as verified by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). "It is clear from Russia's track record then that it did not request this meeting out of a concern for any human right," he said, adding that its illegal invasion of Ukraine was supported by Russian Orthodox leader Patriarch Kirill. "The reason Russia has requested this meeting is once again to distract from its own actions," he asserted. Moscow's invasion continues to be marked by grave violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, including killings, displacement of thousands, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, torture, summary execution of Ukrainians by Russian forces and attacks on civilian infrastructure and objects, including the devastating attacks on residential buildings in Dnipro. "Russia is committing heinous crimes and pointing in the other direction to try to pull the wool over our eyes," he said, calling on Moscow to stop its propaganda and end its invasion of Ukraine.

MICHEL XAVIER BIANG ([Gabon](#)), noting that for 11 months the eyes of the world have been fixed on Ukraine, witnessing destruction, bombings and daily distress, said that as part of the terrible humanitarian consequences of this "total war," the clergy is also impacted. Churches are facing choices that go beyond the domains of faith, he said, warning that religion has been used in the darkest days of history to justify the unjustifiable. Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other instruments of international law, he said, calling on the parties to respect their provisions. Expressing concern about the lack of prospects for negotiations to end this conflict, he said that both sides are honing their weapons and hardening their rhetoric. All strategic calculations are boiling down to the other camp getting exhausted and not to the human cost of the conflict, he said. How much blood should spill before the parties decide to negotiate, he asked, adding that all stakeholders must find a way to silence their guns and give diplomacy a chance.

KHALILAH HACKMAN ([Ghana](#)) joined other speakers in expressing concern about the recent attacks on Dnipro, stressing that attacks on civilians run counter to the Fourth Geneva Convention and are unacceptable. Relations between the Russian Federation and Ukraine have for a long time been marked by religious tensions, which have only deepened in the wake of the former's invasion of the latter. She noted that the activities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, including acts of subversion, have been of concern to the Government and necessitated measures imposed against them — which she hoped would be temporary in nature. Indeed, the exercise of religious freedom may be regulated to ensure the protection of civilians or public order, she said, recalling that many grave crimes have historically been committed under the pretext of religion. Against that backdrop, she called on the parties to exercise tolerance and show mutual respect for other faiths.

JOÃO GENÉSIO DE ALMEIDA FILHO ([Brazil](#)) said freedom of religion is a fundamental human right, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in numerous multilateral instruments. Noting Brazil's own tolerance and diversity, he declared: "Religious differences must not be exploited to fuel intercommunal tensions." It is not clear, at this stage, that that is the case in Ukraine. Brazil expects that Ukraine will act with moderation and discernment, refraining from attitudes that could in any way be characterized as religious persecution. Brazil supports the efforts of religious leaders to facilitate dialogue between Moscow and Kyiv, and encourage the parties to heed the pleas of the majority of United Nations Member States in favour of a diplomatic solution to the conflict. The General Assembly has, on many occasions, expressed its firm condemnation of the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity. "It is necessary to go further," he said, urging the Council to live up to its Charter responsibilities and explore ways to end the conflict without delay.

PEDRO COMISSÁRIO AFONSO ([Mozambique](#)) said that, as the conflict drags on, hard-won human rights and fundamental freedoms are deteriorating and being disregarded, compounding an already fraught situation. This is taking place at a time when the faithful and the God-fearing should devote themselves to reflection, healing and reconciliation, he stressed. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees the freedom of religion, and attacks on this tenet undermine peaceful coexistence among peoples and nations. He therefore urged political leaders and citizens to exercise restraint and abstain from weaponizing this highly sensitive issue, as doing so will only undermine the possibility of future reconciliation. He went on to express concern over the retreat from any possibility of negotiated settlement and over the radicalization of those on both sides of the conflict, reiterating his country's call for an immediate cessation of hostilities and return to direct negotiation between the parties.

ISHIKANE KIMIHIRO ([Japan](#)), Council President for the month, speaking in his national capacity, said the Russian Federation must immediately stop its war of aggression, withdraw all of its troops and military equipment from Ukraine, and respect the latter's

independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders. No argument can justify Moscow's flagrant violation of international law, nor its "hideous acts", including the recent missile strike on a residential building in Dnipro, he stressed.

Mr. NEBENZIA ([Russian Federation](#)), taking the floor a second time, said that Council members have tried to smother the subject of today's meeting by focusing on the entrance of the residential building in Dnipropetrovsk that was destroyed by a missile attack. The missile was launched against an infrastructure facility which was placed in a residential district, in violation of norms of international law, he said, adding that the remnants of the missile fell into a residential building. If the Ukrainian leadership showed a desire to negotiate on a realistic basis, the special military operation would not have happened, he said. Further, "none of you found anything to say in condemnation of the almost daily, almost uninterrupted strikes of the Ukrainian armed forces against Donetsk," he said, adding that the Kyiv regime is intentionally targeting residential districts.

SERGIY KYSLYTSYA ([Ukraine](#)) recalled the very first meeting of the Council that took place at Church House, Westminster, London, on 17 January 1946. "Unfortunately, we are here not to celebrate this important anniversary. We are here because of the nonsense that the Russian Federation made us listen to," he said. It is time to restore the integrity of the entire United Nations system, he stressed, noting that the Council has no right to repeat its failures in Rwanda, to continue to fail in Syria or to remain paralyzed by the Russian position in the case of Crimea and Donbas. Echoing the stance of the Secretary-General, he said systematic reporting of human rights violations has given a voice to the victims. If the Russian Federation was interested in discussing the issue of human rights in the Council — and the freedom of religion is one of the human rights — it would be useful to invite the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to brief the Council.

It is a matter of regret that the representative of President Vladimir Putin's regime is still capable of misusing his permanent seat to make the Council listen to his disinformation narratives, he asserted. Moscow still attempts to divert the attention of the Council from real security threats stemming from its aggression, he said, pointing to "insane" statements about "war mosquitoes", Ukrainian dirty bombs, chemical weapons and secret laboratories. Today, the Russian representative went even further: it is a mockery of the Council when an accomplice of the crimes against humanity starts explaining to the body which denominations in Ukraine should be recognized as canonical institutions and which should be labelled as heretical ones. With regards to the briefer representing the Russian Orthodox Church, he described as "baffling" that a foreign national and a member of a foreign religious organization is invited to brief the Council on the religious situation in another country.

He went on to stress that in 11 months, Moscow destroyed more than 270 churches and sacred buildings. "Wherever Russia comes, religious freedom ends," he said, adding that the country tortures Orthodox Christians, imprisons Muslims, forces Protestant to flee abroad from inevitable repressions and persecutes Jehovah Witnesses. Meanwhile, in Ukraine, everyone has the right to believe in what he or she considers worthy of belief. Religious minorities feel as comfortable as the churches that unite millions of believers. "Russian invasion brings death, slavery, darkness and religious oppression," he said, noting that the deadly nature of the Kremlin regime was again manifested last Saturday, with a new allocation of Russian missiles, aimed to destroy Ukrainian critical infrastructure. The attack killed at least 45 people — including six children —and wounded 79. The powerful missile was less accurate than most modern missiles and its use against densely populated residential areas is a clear war crime, he asserted. Unfortunately, Ukraine has no means at its disposal to shoot down this type of missile. The Security Council should be used to address real threats to international peace and security, threats that take the lives of innocent people across the whole of Ukraine, he said, proposing to organize a Council meeting to address the implications of the Russian war's aggression on the human rights situation in Ukraine.

UKRAINE

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