The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Patriarch Blames Crime and Drugs for Haitian Quake

By Alexandra Odynova

January 19, 2010



Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill holding a cross while conducting a service in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on Monday. **Shamil Zhumatov**

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill said crime, drugs and corruption caused last week's massive earthquake that killed tens of thousands of people in Haiti.

Kirill, speaking during a weekend visit to Kazakhstan, said the Haitian people bore responsibility for the calamity because they had turned away from God, the Ferghana.ru news agency reported late Monday.

"Haiti is a country of poverty and crime, famine, drugs and corruption, where people have lost their moral face," Kirill was quoted as saying.

He compared Haiti with the Dominican Republic, which are located on the same Caribbean island.

"I've visited the island divided between two countries, the Dominican Republic and Haiti. One of them is developing, while the other is affected by crimes, economic recession and political unrest. That part of the island was shattered by the earthquake," he said.

The patriarch also compared Haiti with Kazakhstan, noting that Kazakhstan has not experienced any earthquakes recently despite its seismological position, the news report said.

Asked to clarify Kirill's comments, a church spokesman said Tuesday that the news report had "misinterpreted" the patriarch's words and "taken them out of context." The spokesman, Alexander Volkov, could not immediately clarify, saying only that a transcript of the speech would appear "later" on the Moscow Patriarchate's web site.

A church scholar said Kirill's comments had astonished his foreign listeners in Almaty, but they were quite ordinary to the Orthodox faithful.

"For those who often listen to Patriarch Kirill, such statements seem quite ordinary, but I know that some people in Almaty were amazed," said the scholar, Alexander Soldatov, editor of the religious web site Portal-Credo.ru.

Kirill is known for his statements about large-scale disasters. Last year, he blamed the global financial crisis on the spiritual degradation of the world and called it a trial.

On Friday, the patriarch expressed his condolences to the Haitian president in a statement published on the Moscow Patriarchate's web site.

Kirill isn't the first religious leader to raise eyebrows over remarks about the magnitute-7 earthquake that destroyed the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, last Tuesday.

U.S. television evangelist Pat Robertson said last week that Haiti has been "cursed" because of what he called a "pact with the devil" in its history.

U.S. President Barack Obama's administration, which is overseeing massive relief efforts in Haiti, denounced Robertson's statement. "It never ceases to amaze me that in times of amazing human suffering somebody says something that can be so utterly stupid," White House spokesman Robert Gibbs told reporters.

Repeated calls to the Kremlin's press office for comment about Kirill's comments went unanswered Tuesday.

President Dmitry Medvedev has sent a rescue team and humanitarian supplies on four cargo jets to Haiti.

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