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Religious freedom not a US priority toward allies Egypt and Saudi Arabia

ICC (23.11.2009) / HRWF (24.11.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A hearing was recently held on Religious Freedom in the Middle East which exposed the failure of the State Department and President Obama to address Human Rights abuses in Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

On November 18, Chairman, Gary L. Ackerman (D-NY), as well as other congress representatives, questioned the Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Michael H. Posner, on the State of Political and Religious Freedom in the Middle East. It was evident that Egypt and Saudi Arabia, both close allies of the US, have not been pressured into compliance with international human rights laws.

Egypt, the world's number two recipient of American aid, having received roughly \$1.3 billion per year in military compensation and more than \$500 million per year in economic assistance since 1979, blatantly violates international human rights laws without penalty. The responsibility for the sudden surge of persecution against Coptic Christians, an explicit assault on religious freedom, is deliberately dismissed by the Egyptian government. When Assistant Secretary Posner was asked if measures are being taken to ensure that Egypt is kept liable for its offenses, no strategic plan was presented. It was also concluded that America does not use its foreign assistance as leverage to demand that Egypt adhere to international human rights laws.

In the same way, Saudi Arabia, a government that denies recognition or protection of any religion other than Sunni Islam, and whose constitutional principles are founded on Sharia law, is not held accountable by the US for its human rights abuses.

When asked by Representative Ackerman if the US places any conditionality upon trade with Saudi Arabia or aid given to Egypt in regards to human rights offenses, Assistant Secretary Posner replied, "Has it been done? It's been done... in various ways and various places. Could it be done more? Yes. Should it be done more? Yes."

Aidan Clay, ICC Regional Manager of the Middle East, said, "Avoiding a strategic plan to address the fundamental democratic principles of religious freedom has not been a top priority of the US government toward Egypt for years. The US is a light to democratic values, and must take the lead in promoting and exporting democratic principles to countries that violate human rights laws. We ask President Obama to develop a strategic plan by applying human rights sanctions on US assistance to Egypt and US dealings with Saudi Arabia, to nominate a Religious Freedom Ambassador, and to affirm human rights as a core objective of US foreign policy."

Death sentences for Egypt killing

BBC (16.11.2009) / HRWF (18.11.2009) - Website: www.hrwf.net - Email: info@hrwf.net - Two Christians have been sentenced to death in Egypt for killing a Muslim man who married one of their relatives.

Rami and Raafat Khella, the brother and uncle of Mariam Atef Khella, broke into her home in Cairo in 2008 and opened fire on her husband, Ahmed Sallah.

Ms Khella had converted to Islam three years earlier to marry Mr Sallah, in defiance of the wishes of her family.

The death sentence will now be reviewed by Egypt's Grand Mufti, Ali Gomaa, its highest authority on Islamic law.

The state-appointed cleric is expected to rule on Monday.

Ms Khella and her baby daughter, Nur, were also wounded in last year's attack, which left Mr Sallah's body riddled with bullets.

Christians, most of whom belong to the Coptic denomination, make up around 10% of Egypt's 80 million population.

They often complain of discrimination and harassment, though live relatively harmoniously in the majority Muslim country.

Niqab, chador, burqa debate - divisive views

WUNRN (10.2009) / HRWF (09.10.2009) - Website: www.hrwf.net - Email: info@hrwf.net - Hijab, chador, burqa or niqab? The veiling of Muslim women continues to provoke controversy. This time it is the niqab, or face veil, at the center of the conflict-charged fundamental debate.

The bone of contention is none less than the Grand Imam of Cairo University and the Al-Azhar Mosque. Mohammed Sayed al-Tantawi, one of the most senior legal scholars in Sunni Islam, declared that a veil that covers a woman's face leaving only a slit for the eyes is not religiously permissible.

During a visit to one of the schools affiliated to Al-Azhar University early in October, the theologian was irritated by a girl's niqab. He then ordered the baffled girl, who had ironically only worn the veil in honor of the high-ranking visitor, to take it off and never put it on again. "These are traditions that have nothing to do with religion," he explained to the students. At the same time the Imam promised to ban this particular kind of veil from the school grounds.

Reasons of security

A few days later, female students veiled with the niqab were no longer allowed to enter the halls of residence at Al-Azhar University. Those who did not take off their niqab were sent away. The supreme council at the highest seat of religious learning in Sunni Islam had "agreed the ban on the veil," announced Mohamed Abdel-Aziz, deputy chairman of the council. The ban also applies to the girls' classrooms. It affects both teaching staff and the 500,000 girls out of a total of 1.4 million schoolchildren and students who study at the university and its affiliated educational establishments.

The decision was also approved by the Ministry for Higher Education, which announced that it plans to extend the ban to universities across the country. Minister Hany Halal explained the measure would primarily be taken for security reasons. Just recently 15 young men dressed in niqabs tried to enter the girls' dormitories, he said.

"I've been living in a student hall of residence for years," said one female student who wanted to remain anonymous to avoid potential problems with the university administration, "but I've never heard of anything like that happening."

A frightening take on Islam

Asra Q. Nomani says that a security risk is indeed a valid argument. The US author has just published a book titled "Standing Alone: An American Woman's Struggle for the Soul of Islam". But she says such an argument is not based on uninvited male visitors to girls' dormitories. From Islamabad to Baghdad, the niqab has been misused by militant Islamists to avoid police checkpoints or to carry out attacks.

Nomani says however that a much more decisive factor in any move to ban the face veil is "that it stands for a frightening take on Islam, one that preaches the literal interpretation of the Koran." And this is especially problematic in the interpretation of those verses where the meaning is in any case unclear, she adds.

"Militants exploit this to justify domestic violence, intolerance or even suicide attacks," says Nomani. When she talks about "a frightening take on Islam", she is referring to the schools of thought known as Wahhabism and Salafism, which are based in Saudi Arabia and promote ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam.

There are two sections of the Koran that make this especially clear (Sura 24, verse 31 and Sura 33, verse 59), passages that make references to the covering of the female body. Neither passage can be unequivocally interpreted as an instruction that a woman must wear a head covering, or exactly defines the parts of the body that have to be concealed.

Pieces of clothing are named, such as "jilbab" and "khimar", but it remains unclear what form, color or function they had during the Prophet's era. In a German translation of the Koran commissioned by Saudi Arabia this is not taken into consideration at all, and the word "khimar" is simply translated as "Kopftücher", or "headscarves". One simply has to be aware of the subtleties of meaning can be lost in translation.

"This Wahhabi and Salafi mindset came to Egypt in the 1970s," says Hala Mustafa, editor-in-chief at Al Ahram Media in Cairo. "And it has increased its hold over the last three decades." This is evident on the streets of the capital, with increasing numbers of women covering themselves from head to toe.

"Salafi satellite channels today propagate the message that the niqab is an obligation," explains Salem Abdel Gelil, from the Egyptian Ministry of Religious Endowments, Awqaf.

The government of the Nile nation is not in the least happy about this ultra-conservative trend. The niqab ban at universities is just one of many steps Cairo is taking to counter it. The Ministry of Religious Endowments prints brochures that describe the niqab as un-Islamic. The Health Ministry plans to ban doctors and nurses from wearing the face veil.

Against constitution and freedom

Sumerian temple priestesses wore veils in 5000 B.C. In 1300 B.C., Assyrian kings introduced the veil for married and wealthy women. This is similar to the Byzantines (4th to 5th centuries A.D.), the Sassanids (c. 224-652 A.D.), in Ancient Greece and old Rome, where to be veiled was a privilege reserved for high society.

So the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University Mohammed Sayed al-Tantawi is absolutely right when he describes the niqab as a tradition from a pre-Islamic era. But this view has

not made the theologian – who is known for his headstrong manner – any more popular. He has already come under fire several times for supporting the French ban on the hijab, shaking hands with the Israeli President Shimon Peres, and insisting that women pregnant from rape should have the right to abort.

The conservative Egyptian cleric Youseff al-Badri described the niqab ban as "a violation of a constitution that is there to guarantee public freedom."

The Grand Mufti of Dubai holds a similar view. He spoke of a "restriction of the freedom of women," and said the move was "in total contempt of their faith, their culture and their traditions."

The Saudi Arabian Sheikh Mohammed al-Nojaimi from the Institute of Islamic Law spoke of a possible division of Egyptian society into two camps, for or against the niqab. At the same time, he contradicted his Egyptian counterpart Tantawi's claim that the face veil has nothing to do with Islam: "The niqab is mentioned in reports on the traditions of the Prophet," he said. These state that a woman should only take off her face veil during the pilgrimage to Mecca, as "this goes to prove that she wore it at all other times."

"What are wearers of the niqab supposed to do?"

For devout Muslims who wear the niqab out of conviction, the Egyptian ban is tantamount to a defeat, even if it is restricted to universities. They have become accustomed to the fact that action is taken against the headscarf or veil in western countries. And perhaps also in the few secular countries where most of the population are Muslims, such as in Turkey or Tunisia.

But now the veil, a piece of clothing that has so often had to be defended against criticism, is being declared un-Islamic by members of the Muslim community, and furthermore by one of the most senior legal scholars in Sunni Islam. The result is helplessness.

"What are we supposed to do?" asks Sadaf Farooqi in the Saudi-Gazette newspaper. "What's really unsettling is the swift global impact of this development," writes the columnist, who lives in Karachi. "Within a few days after Mohammed Sayed al-Tantawi's comments, all kinds of groups from Italy to Canada began calling for a ban on the niqab." Farooqi writes that such groups also include "self-proclaimed progressive Muslims." Of course these feminist Muslims now feel vindicated; after all, they have for a long time described the veil as an antiquated tradition that does not belong to Islam.

"It is high time to impose a global ban on the face veil," writes US author Asra Q. Nomani. "It is the expression of an Islam that must disappear."

For Sadaf Farooqi, who is proud to wear her niqab, this is something she finds difficult to understand. The journalist thanks God that in her country, she is allowed to leave the house in her veil, visit educational establishments and go for a walk without fear of abuse. "A luxury that our Muslim sisters in Britain, France and Canada do not enjoy," she says.

Church renovation prompts Muslim mob attack in Egypt

By Mary Abdelmassih

(AINA) (28.10.2009) / HRWF (02.10.2009) - Website: www.hrwf.net - Email: info@hrwf.net - On Tuesday evening, October 27, a Muslim mob attacked the Church of

St. George in the village of Nazlet Albadraman, located in the Deir Mawas District, Minya Province. The Priest and the congregation were held inside until they were freed by the village mayor after security forces dispersed the mob. The attack was prompted by the restoration of the Church's tower, for which the Church holds the necessary permit.

Protestant Pastor Habib Ghattas said that the Coptic Orthodox priest Father Serabamon, phoned him from inside the Church and asked him to contact the security forces. "We need them to come and rescue us from the mob," he told Pastor Ghattas.

The mob threw stones and destroyed the church's windows, before going on to destroy cars, shops and Coptic homes. One Coptic woman, Ayman Nada Landy, suffered head injuries. Security forces are presently deployed in the village to diffuse the situation and prevent further escalation. The village was also placed under curfew.

St. George's Church in Nazlet Albadraman serves nearly 5000 Copts. It was renovated eight years ago except for the tower, which is located on the top of the gate entrance to the church. It was made of soft bricks and posed a threat to the lives of the Church visitors. After four years of conflict with the authorities, the church obtained a permit for the renovation work two days ago. Once a license was obtained, the church demolished the dilapidated tower and began digging the foundations for the new one.

According to Free Copts' reporter Nader Shukry the incident started at 8 pm Tuesday evening when a village Muslim called Saber Ahmed Saleh stood in front of the church and started accusing the priests by saying "This way you are causing sectarian sedition, you have to stop your building works." The Church guard was unsuccessful in getting him to leave. The situation began to deteriorate, as Muslims started to congregate, chant and hurl stones at the Church, breaking all its windows. "The village mayor intervened and the security forces forced the mob to leave. The mob left the Church to roam the streets rampaging cars, shops and homes belonging to Copts," added Shoukry.

In an aired audio interview Protestant Pastor Habib Ghattas told activist Wagih Yacoub of Middle East Christian Association "The Muslim mob attacked the Church, and the priests and congregation who were at evening prayers were prevented by the mob from leaving the church. In the beginning the security forces were not able to control the situation. I had to phone state security again to get enforcements. Of course they did take their time arriving to the scene, as usual." He also confirmed that the mob burned down the home of Ishaq Moussa, as well as destroyed Coptic homes, shops and cars.

Pastor Ghattas said that what made the situation deteriorate was "while the mob was congregating near the Church, a preacher at the 'Islamic Charity Society' in the village was calling on Muslims, through his loudspeaker, to take action against the 'Christian Infidels,' so more and more people joined the mob."

Although security forces are presently stationed in the village, some Copts are still taking shelter at the Church, to avoid engagement with the Muslims and for fear of being arrested randomly by the police.

Minya Copts are staging a three-day protest fast, October 26-28, against church-building restrictions and the escalating Muslim attacks on them.

Attorney Mamdouh Nakhla, Director of "Al-Kalema" Human Rights Center called today on President Mubarak to dismiss the Governor of Minya, in view of the increasing sectarian incidents and abduction and forced Islamization of Coptic girls during his tenure in office.

Forced islamization of Christian conscripts in the Egyptian Army

By Mary Abdelmassih

AINA (12.10.2009) / HRWF (13.10.2009) - Website: www.hrwf.net - Email: info@hrwf.net - Mistreatment of Christian conscripts in the Egyptian army, including beatings, psychological harassment and torture, at the hands of radical Muslim officers to force them to convert to Islam is widespread, but is rarely reported by conscripts for fear of reprisals.

In the latest incident, 22-year-old draftee Mubarak Masood Zakaria, a Coptic Christian, died in mysterious circumstances on August 15, 2009. Three days after his death the police in Mallawi summoned his father, Masood Zakaria, to inform him of his son's "sudden death" of "natural causes," and give him the body and burial permission. "We were not allowed to see the body," said the father, who works as a rope spinner and lives under the poverty line, in the Upper Egyptian village of Deir Abu Hennes, Mallawi, in Al-Minya Governorate.

Although the death certificate stated "cause of death still under investigation," permission for burial was granted.

On their way to the church for the funeral ceremony, the odor from Mubarak's corpse was so offensive the Zakaria family and some mourners decided to inspect the body before its burial. They discovered that Mubarak's body was riddled with bullets, his face was bruised and his abdomen was cut open and sewn.

The military prosecutor in Assiut summoned the father several days after the burial and tried to explain to him how his son shot himself during his sleep, with the weapon that was with him, reported Ms Nermin Reda, correspondent for Copts United advocacy.

The father believes that there is foul play, because his son was always complaining of ill-treatment by his superiors because of his religion "My son sustained multiple gunshot wounds, and what the persecutor told me is illogical," he told Ms. Reda

A mourner at the funeral voiced his fears that the booming clandestine human organs trafficking in Egypt could have found a new source of supply in poor Copts serving in the Egyptian army. "Why was his abdomen cut open and sewn if no autopsy was carried out. I believe they admitted him to hospital for a few hours to examine the state of his internal organs for harvesting."

He explained that conscripts who are targeted for enforced Islamization are those who have no school education and come from the villages, mostly from Upper Egypt; their families are poor and easily intimidated by the authorities should their sons be harmed. They have no awareness of how to seek human rights organizations or the means to pursue their grievances further.

Army officers have been previously accused by Coptic activists, based on documented evidence, of subjecting Christian draftees to persecution and extreme torture leading sometimes to their death, as a way to force them to convert to Islam.

One of these cases was that of Hany Seroufim, a Coptic draftee serving in the Egyptian army in Aswan, who was tortured and killed in August 2006, after refusing to convert to Islam. His body was thrown into the Nile near his home town Naga Hamadi. His family was told by the army that he drowned. Marks of torture covered his whole body, with the cross tattooed on his arm cut out with a knife.

Earlier, Hani had told his family that the unit commanding officer always humiliated and tortured him in front of his peer soldiers, because Hani was a Christian. When he asked him blatantly to convert to Islam, Hani refused and told him he would notify the military intelligence, to which the officer threatened Hany with revenge.

Pressure from Coptic advocacy groups forced the state to perform an autopsy nearly four months later but the results were inconclusive because of the lapse of time and the state of the corpse. Christian organizations were able to obtain photos of Hany's tortured body. Recordings of his family's testimony were obtained and aired by the American CBN News. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVSt-EYwjrA>

Coptic activist Wagih Yacoub said that his advocacy, Middle East Christian Association, will sponsor the case of Mubarak Masood Zakaria and that top attorney Mamdouh Nakhla, head of the Al-Kalema Human Rights Center will handle the case.

The death of Mubarak leaves many unanswered questions, including the extent of collusion between the different authorities, including the prosecution, to cover-up the crime.

Coptic family forced to surrender woman rescued in Egypt

With extortion and violence, authorities pressure father to return daughter to Muslim husband

By Will Morris

Compass Direct (09.10.2009) / HRWF (10.10.2009) - Website: www.hrwf.net - Email: info@hrwf.net - State Security Investigations (SSI) forces in Egypt arrested, abused and then extorted money from a Coptic Christian for rescuing his daughter from her Muslim husband, who was holding her against her will in Alexandria, according to sources in Egypt.

Security forces also arrested 10 people in Alexandria and tortured them in an attempt to find those involved in the rescue. Authorities are preparing to make a new wave of arrests, the sources said.

On Sept. 30, they said, the only daughter of Gamal Labib Hanna called home and asked her family to save her from her Muslim husband. How Hanna's daughter, Myrna Gamal Hanna, came to marry Mohamad Osama Hefnawy is disputed, but sources said the now-20-year-old woman was 19 and under the age of marital consent when she and Hefnawy were wed 10 months ago.

According to Egyptian civil law, a woman under the age of 21 has to have approval of her father or another male member of her family if the father is deceased. In Myrna Gamal Hanna's case, no such approval was given. Moreover, sources said, the woman's future father-in-law was inexplicably allowed to stand in place of her father in approving the marriage, in violation of Egyptian law.

Later, sources said, Hefnawy and his father converted the young woman to Islam.

The sources said that the elder Hanna went to Hefnawy's apartment on Oct. 1 to get his daughter. En route he passed a café where he enlisted the help of Rafaat Girges Habib and at least four other men.

At the apartment, Hefnawy attacked the Copts with a metal pole but Hanna was able to retrieve his daughter, who was six months pregnant. He and his wife hid her at an undisclosed location.

After the rescue, Hefnawy and his neighbors filed a report with local police and the SSI, a powerful Interior Ministry agency accused of various human rights violations. Soon after, Hanna's brothers, one brother-in-law and his mother-in-law were rounded up, charged with abduction and detained.

According to sources in Egypt, at least one of the family members was tortured until Hanna turned himself in. Authorities also ransacked his apartment.

The sources said security forces pressured Hanna until he agreed not only to hand his daughter back to Hefnawy but also to give him several thousand dollars.

"Cases like this are very common, they happen every day," said Rasha Noor, an Egyptian human rights activist and journalist living outside of Egypt. "That's usually what happens when families try to rescue daughters from their kidnappers in most of these kinds of cases."

As part of terms forced upon Hanna, he is not allowed to see his daughter unless he meets her in a police station and is accompanied by SSI officer Essam Shawky. Additionally, phone calls to his daughter will be monitored.

"Once [a woman] becomes a Muslim, you can't get her back," Noor said.

Hanna and the members of his family were released on Oct. 2, but soon after authorities began seeking Habib. Police broke into Habib's plumbing shop and demolished it.

On Saturday (Oct. 3) they rounded up at least 10 people, most members of Habib's immediate family. Security forces tortured the men, but sources said Habib's brother, Romany, bore the brunt of the brutality. When he was released the next day, they said, his clothes and those of the others were smeared with blood.

Habib and at least four other people remain in hiding in Egypt. Sources said authorities will make a third round of arrests in an attempt to flush him out.

Christian arrested for distributing tracts in Egypt

Protestant Copt, 61, illegally detained then released without charges after four days

By Will Morris

Compass Direct (06.10.2009) / HRWF (06.10.2009) - Website: www.hrwf.net - Email: info@hrwf.net - An Egyptian Christian arrested in Cairo for handing out gospel leaflets and held in prison illegally for four days has been released, the freed Protestant Copt told Compass.

Abdel Kamel, 61, was arrested on Sept. 23 in downtown Cairo for handing out copies of a Christian leaflet. As they arrested him, police told Kamel it was "unlawful" to hand out religious information on public roads. When Kamel countered that Muslims commonly hand out Islamic literature, police told him it was "more unlawful" for Christians. Kamel also didn't have his identification card with him.

Nabil Ghobreyal, an attorney who worked to gain Kamel's release, said there is no law in Egypt forbidding the distribution of religious material.

Police handcuffed Kamel, put him into a police car and seized his leaflets. Authorities then took him to a police station for interrogation. While in custody, Kamel said, he remained in handcuffs for hours, was thrown to the ground, spit upon and threatened with violence.

Kamel said he wasn't tortured, but when asked to describe his treatment, he wept uncontrollably.

The lay preacher said he was proclaiming repentance and forgiveness in Christ because he views it as a service to others.

"I love my people," he said. "I love Egypt, and I feel my service is directed toward the people I love and the country I love."

Authorities held Kamel for four days without charge and did not allow him to see family members or a lawyer. He said officers did allow him to receive food, medicine and written messages.

Attorney Ghobreyal said that Kamel was an "honest and innocent man" who was arrested illegally. When Ghobreyal approached an assistant attorney general to ask for Kamel's release, the prosecutor asked him to wait for three days, which Ghobreyal immediately challenged. Ghobreyal said that in free speech cases involving religion, state attorneys are often "loathe" to keep police from breaking the law, or at best "complacent" about letting them make baseless arrests.

Sometime close to midnight on Kamel's second day in jail, police continued their investigation by going through his apartment and removing all written materials in his house. Describing his apartment in Al-Nakhl as being "ransacked," he said it was what most angered him about his arrest.

"[The gospel] is all about a message of love, a message of peace," he said. "There is nothing illegal about it, and it is annoying that they know that, but in spite of that they came there in this manner. It is very bad."

Kamel said there is a double standard in Egypt when it comes to freedom of religion. He said Muslims in Egypt are allowed to promote Islam using "books, pamphlets and loudspeakers," but Christians are often forbidden from sharing their faith.

"Why, when we are doing it, are we not even allowed to put our view across?" he said. "Why aren't we treated the same?"

Eventually Kamel was transferred to a jail in Al Minya, where he was interrogated a second time for two and a half hours. Investigators told him that the pamphlets he distributed did not "insult Islam," a serious charge commonly on the law books of Islamic-majority countries.

Police made it clear to Kamel that they did not want to release him, Ghobreyal said. They released him grudgingly because they were worried about reports in the media and from human rights groups. He was released without charge.

"The pressure in the media and the announcements made on the Internet helped me a lot," Ghobreyal said.

Kamel, who describes himself as being a committed Christian for 30 years, said he does not plan to file a complaint against the police but will rather "leave it to God to reward them accordingly."

His 29-year-old daughter, Mariam Kamel, said that even though she is afraid that police will continue to harass her family, she is thankful to God that police released her father.

"I've seen God's hand in every crisis we've had over the past 30 years of his work preaching the gospel," she said.

She said she was sure her father would return to preaching. Still shaken, her father said he was not so sure.

"Who can carry on in a situation like this?" Kamel said.

Egypt arrests violators of dawn-to-dusk Ramadan fast

Cam McGrath

Inter Press Service (16.09.2009) / HRWF (17.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Hundreds of Egyptians are reported to have been arrested for eating, drinking or smoking in public during daylight hours as part of a police campaign against people caught breaking the Ramadan fast. "Nobody has the right to arrest someone for eating or drinking in Ramadan," says rights activist Gamal Eid, head of the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI). "When we hear this we wonder, is this Egypt or Afghanistan? It's Taliban mentality."

Local newspapers reported that over 150 Egyptians had been arrested for breaking the Muslim fast in the southern governorate of Aswan on August 30, but the motive behind the round-up could not be corroborated.

Emergency laws in force since 1981 allow police to detain individuals without charge, making it difficult to know for certain the reason for arrest.

A local police chief insisted that the press had "misinterpreted" a routine security crackdown on beggars, homeless people and drug dealers. However, reports of arrests in other governorates, and statements by security officials appear to indicate a coordinated government campaign to enforce Islam's prohibition of eating or drinking between sunrise and sunset during the holy month of Ramadan, which began August 22.

"I've spoken to two who were arrested," says Eid. "It happened [for publicly breaking the fast], and they were very afraid and angry about it."

Arrests have been reported in many different areas. Seven youths in the Delta governorate of Dakahlia were taken into custody last week for smoking on the street during the fasting hours, and released after paying a fine of \$90, Al-Arabiya news channel reported. It added that arrests were also made in Hurghada, a tourist resort on the Red Sea, where government officials ordered all cafes and restaurants shut during the fasting hours.

In an interview with Al-Shorouk independent newspaper published September 10, Interior Ministry spokesman Abdel-Karim Hamdy said a police campaign had been launched in various governorates to arrest people breaking the fast in public during Ramadan.

"They [the violators] have to learn modesty," he said. "In the past, Egyptian society was very pious, and I hope this piety will be restored ... I ask [opponents] to read the law well before criticising the Interior Ministry."

Non-Muslims, Christians arrested in Egypt for eating during Ramadan

The Arrest is Another Indication of Growing Islamization in Egypt

ICC (10.09.2009) / HRWF (14.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that Egyptian authorities arrested more than 150 people for eating during Ramadan.

The arrests were made in the southern governate of Aswan, in addition to many more in the Red Sea resort town of Hurghada. According to Al-Arabia, the authorities are cracking down on anyone, including foreigners and non-Muslims, who are found drinking, eating or smoking during the fasting hours.

This is the first time that Egyptian officials are taking such drastic action. And it is another indication of further Islamization in the country's public life. Egypt now seems to be following the practices of the conservative Gulf States, where eating, drinking or smoking during Ramadan results in imprisonment for a month or a fine of \$350.

"This is against basic human rights of citizens. We (the Christians) are not Muslims and don't believe in Islamic fasting. We have our faith and our own fasting. Even for Muslims, the decision to fast or not to fast is a personal issue," said Magdhi Kalil in interview with ICC. Mr. Kalil is the director of the Middle East Freedom Forum.

Jonathan Racho, ICC's Regional Manager for Africa and the Middle East, said, "Punishing non-Muslims for eating or drinking during Ramadan is both outrageous and a clear violation of the freedom of religion. We condemn in strongest terms the measure by Egypt to force Muslims and non-Muslims alike to fast during Ramadan. We call upon the international community to hold Egypt accountable for its illegal and unconscionable actions."

Please call the Embassy of Egypt in your country and politely ask Egyptian officials to release all the individuals they arrested for eating during Ramadan and to desist from making further arrests.

Egyptian Embassies

Country	Phone	Fax	Email
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Violence again erupts in upper Egypt over quest for worship site

Two Copts wounded in Minya province over plan to use building as church venue

By Roger Elliott

Compass Direct (31.07.2009) / HRWF (01.08.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The recent eruption of sectarian violence in Egypt's Minya province continued last week as local Christians again faced harsh reprisals from Muslims for trying to convert a building into a worship facility.

On July 24 security forces in the village of Hawasliya were able to prevent a crowd of Muslims, which numbered in the hundreds according to some reports, from torching the building. But the mob succeeded in setting fire to four neighboring stables, killing sheep and cows belonging to Copts.

During the melee two Copts, including an elderly woman, were wounded. Both received hospital treatment.

"When Muslims see that Christians are making a church, they get upset about it," said Teresa Kamal, a local journalist. "Why are people full of hate like this? Something has happened to radicalize the people."

Pastor Milad Shehata, 39, heads up the project to convert the four-story property into a church building. He told Compass that the village's Protestant Christians had no other place to worship.

"I have no intention of leaving this place at any price," said Shehata. "This place has been built from the sweat and hard-earned money of very poor people. Even if I or my family is killed, it doesn't matter. I will not leave this place."

Shehata had begun to refurbish the building to accommodate church meetings and was planning to apply for permission to use it as a place of worship before holding services on the premises.

On July 23, officers investigating complaints from Muslim villagers about two crosses Shehata had installed on the outside of the building took him to the local police station. After questioning, they released him with orders to return the next morning. At that time two policemen escorted him to the main prison in Minya, where he was held without charge until Saturday afternoon (July 25).

"I don't know why I was arrested," said Shehata. "I was there for 37 hours, but no one even gave me even a cup of water."

Since the attack on July 24, elders from the Muslim community have extended the offer of a reconciliation meeting on condition the church is never opened.

"There is no point in holding a reconciliation meeting if we have to close the church," said Shehata. "The church is the whole point."

Recent Troubles

There have long been drafts of a unified law for the building of places of worship in Egypt aimed at resolving recurrent conflicts faced by new churches. Such legislation, however, has been consistently passed over in parliamentary sessions.

Human rights lawyer Naguib Gobrael said there was a stark contrast between the freedom to practice religion given to Muslims and that afforded to Christians.

"Muslims can put a mat down anywhere and pray and no one objects," he said, pointing out the contrast with Christians' inability to secure worship sites. "Why do they differentiate? It implies that we can't have private prayers."

The July 24 incident marks the fourth time in as many weeks that planned new church buildings have sparked violent responses from inhabitants of villages surrounding the city of Minya.

Despite the recent high incidents of sectarian strife, Minya Gov. Ahmad Dia'a El-Din told Compass that inter-faith relations are not as strained as they may seem.

"These kinds of attacks are not as frequent as some people imagine," he said. "They are not happening night and day. The proof is the businesses – you find many shops owned by Copts. People live together and Copts are wealthy, they are doing fine business."

El-Din seemed eager to demonstrate that he led by example.

"I personally work closely with Christian people and have good relationships with them," he said. "I harbor no personal animosity."

Gobrael, however, was not impressed.

"The governorate of Minya has the highest level of radicalization and intolerance," he said. "The governor has totally failed in tackling this issue from all different aspects – education, media, culture and security."

Two clashes shake Egypt's Coptic community

Security forces fail to avert attacks on Christians in separate cases

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct (07.07.2009) / HRWF (08.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Separate cases of sectarian violence in two villages erupted in Egypt last week, shaking the country's Coptic Christian community as Muslims attacked their homes and security forces imposed curfews in an effort to maintain peace.

Last Wednesday (July 1) in the village of Kafr El Barbari in Mit Ghamr, Dakahlia, north of Cairo, Muslim villagers mourning the death of 18-year-old Mohamed Ramadan Ezzat, an Al Azhar University student stabbed to death by a Coptic grocer, attacked Christian homes with stones, breaking their windows.

During post-funeral violence, 25 people were injured as hundreds of angry Muslims attacked Coptic homes. Some sources claimed that those who attacked the Christian houses were Muslims from surrounding villages. Reports varied on extent of damage to houses.

Many of the 1,000 Christian Copts who live in the village of 4,000 inhabitants fled or remained indoors out of fear that tensions may escalate. A non-profit organization that

visited Kafr El Barbari on Sunday reported that it was unable to make contact with Christians.

On June 29, Ezzat had gone to the family grocery store of 50-year-old Emil Gerges to buy soft drinks. A dispute about an alleged debt Ezzat had with the store ended when Gerges' son John, 20, stabbed the young Muslim. Ezzat died in the hospital that evening, after which his family members attacked and burned the Gerges' store as well as two of the family apartments.

Gerges, his two sons and wife were arrested on June 29, and while his wife was released for health reasons, the men of the family remain in prison under charges of manslaughter. Security forces ordered a curfew in the village and placed a cordon around it to prohibit movement into and out of it.

Although the conflict in Kafr El Barbari was seen as a family dispute, sources say it quickly escalated into sectarian violence, heightening tensions throughout the country.

"The event could have passed as an individual fight, only there is so much tension now that if any individual fight happens between a Muslim and Christian, the whole village erupts and fights," said Samia Sidhom, news editor of Egyptian Coptic weekly Watani.

So far there has been no official reconciliation meeting between the village's Christians and Muslims, although leaders have met. Ezzat's father, in a statement this week to online news agency Youm 7, said that his family has conflict only with the Gerges family and asked Christians who had fled to return to their homes. He did, however, imply that if the courts did not vindicate his son's death, he would.

Sidhom of Watani said that overall there is an increase in sectarian tensions in the country because Islamic elements see a benefit to dissension rising.

"It destabilizes the country, and it puts security authorities at a weak point," she said.

Other Coptic experts, however, believe that security forces have a hand in most cases of sectarian violence across the nation.

"The police are more than capable of controlling any situation if they want to," said Ibrahim Habib, chairman of U.K.-based United Copts, of the apparent lack of control during Ezzat's funeral. "This is deliberate I think. Some authority in the police feels that this is a time to teach Christians a lesson, to humiliate them according to sharia [Islamic law], to treat them as dhimmi, to treat them as second class citizens. If the government is serious, it is more than capable of controlling things."

Rumors Lead to More Violence

On the heels of violence in Ezbet Boshra-East last month that left Christian villagers imprisoned and hiding in their houses on suspicion of holding a prayer meeting without permission, just five kilometers away in Ezbet Guirgis on Friday (July 3) Christians faced a similar fate.

After rumors spread among Ezbet Guirgis's 400 Muslims that the majority Christians were planning to use a four-story building as a church, early in the morning the Muslims set fire to a warehouse adjacent to the building.

The village priest, the Rev. Saman Shehata, had applied for permission to use the building for worship last year, but authorities had rejected it.

The village's 1,400 Coptic Christians have not used the building due to lack of official permission even though they have owned it for three years. Instead, the Christians have been using an old 35-square-meter building that has association status, allowing them to pray in it.

Shehata told Compass he believed that local police authorities who resented the application for permission to use the newer building as a church, which he filed eight months ago, spread the rumor that Copts would worship there in spite the denial of his request.

"These rumors are most likely spread by the lower ranking people from the police themselves," Shehata said. "They incite the Muslims to show that they don't want the building."

The priest, who has been working in Ezbet Guirgis for 12 years, said his application for church use was rejected due to its proximity to the village's only mosque.

The fire damaged two buildings, and Muslims also tried to burn cars belonging to the church and priest. Fire brigades arrived at the scene 90 minutes later. Shehata said that after morning prayers, when he went to file a complaint about the fires, he received a phone call informing him that Muslims were attacking Christians.

Few Christians were injured. Authorities arrested 11 Christian Copts and five Muslims in connection with the fires and ensuing violence. Security forces also placed a temporary curfew on the village of Ezbet Guirgis and are monitoring the village.

On his way to visit the Christian prisoners and to give them food today, Shehata said that security forces had detained and were trying to blame Safuat Atalla, a 28-year-old Copt, for the fires, which also destroyed some of the villagers' stored crop harvest. Atalla used to work as the Shehata's driver and had resigned on friendly terms after he found a better job to support his new wife and ailing parents.

Shehata, however, fears that the police may be torturing Atalla to extract a false confession that he set the fires out of anger toward the priest. Shehata said it was impossible to know how the prisoners are being treated as police have heavily supervised his visits.

"The greatest difficulty is that the prayer space is very limited, and it can only accommodate 1 percent of the Christian villagers," said Shehata of the community's older, smaller building. "People have to stand outside the building whenever they come for mass."

The priest said the excuse authorities give for not allowing them to use or build a church is to maintain the village's harmony.

"Christians are forced to pray in the street, and other villagers pass through them with their cattle, and this also leads to friction," said Shehata. "So isn't it better to pray within four walls than in the streets, humiliated?"

Shehata said this was the first time the two communities clashed in the village.

Priest Leaves

The case of Ezbet Guirgis is similar to that of Ezbet Boshra-East, said an Egyptian human rights expert, as in both villages violence erupted on rumors about the use of church-owned buildings.

Reconciliation meetings are expected to take place in Ezbet Guirgis soon, but the expert said it was likely that in order to maintain peace, Shehata may have to leave the village as did the Rev. Isaak Castor from Ezbet Boshra-East after last month's clashes.

"It's expected that Father Saman must leave, because they accepted that solution in Boshra so it will be hard to accept anything else," said the expert.

Rumors have already started circulating that Muslims are demanding that Shehata leave.

"Father Isaac is already out of the village," said the expert, who recently spoke with Castor. "He left before the reconciliation meeting that happened on Wednesday [July 1]."

Castor moved to Minya at the request of his superiors.

Commenting on the three cases of sectarian violence within two weeks, Habib of United Copts expressed worry about the negative role security forces have played in the events and the lack of equality for Coptic Christians seeking their rights based on the Constitution, which in theory grants them religious freedom.

"The national security force is a danger, and the police are not even-handed," he said. "Even when it comes to court, they do not supply enough evidence, the Islamists have infiltrated the courts, and this is a bad recipe for Egypt. We are really worried about what will happen in the future to the Christians."

Christian homes burned in Egypt after death of Muslim man

By Mary Abdelmassih

AINA (01.07.2009) / HRWF (02.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Another incident of a Muslim mob attacking, torching and looting Coptic Christian homes and shops took place today in the village of Meet El-Korashy, Meet Ghamr, after a Muslim young man died following a fight with a Coptic shopkeeper. State Security cordoned off the whole village and placed it under curfew. The Shopkeeper and his family were arrested and charged with murder.

19-year old Mohamad Ramadan Ezzat, student at the Al-Azhar Islamic Institute, returned an empty bottle of soft drink and asked for a refund. When the shopkeeper refused to return the refund money, witnesses say that Ezzat broke the bottle and attacked Emil, who stabbed him in self-defense with the sharp edge of the bottle glass. Ezzat was taken to hospital where he died the following day.

Prosecution arrested the shopkeeper Emile, his two sons and and his wife, who were all charged with murder. Muslim witnesses told newspapers' correspondents that Ezzat broke the bottle to prove that it was his, and did not intend to stab the shopkeeper.

According to the Egyptian newspaper ElYom Elsabe, people in the village, after hearing news of his death, gathered in the village awaiting the arrival of the coffin, which arrived under heavy guard. The funeral was attended by hundreds of people, all wailing and chanting slogans of 'Allah Akbar' and calls for revenge.

When the villagers returned from the burial, they stoned Coptic homes, destroyed walls and set fire to the homes belonging to the Coptic family. The fire brigade arrived hours later because of the crowds, by that time the fire had consumed the Coptic homes.

Some Muslim youth closed the road between the town of Zagazig and Mansoura, and forced trucks on the road to offload the day workers. Police arrested them the Muslim youth and imposed a curfew and closed all roads in and out of the village.

Dr. Naguib Gobraeel, President of the Egyptian Union Human Rights Organization, sent an urgent appeal to the Minister of Interior and Director of State Security in Dakahlia asking for protection for the Coptic inhabitants whose homes are being torched, their shops looted and who are being forced to stay indoors.

Egyptian court grants custody of sons to Coptic mother

But twins will keep father's Muslim identity in their records, creating future problems

By Michael Larson

Compass Direct (01.07.2009) / HRWF (02.07.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A Christian mother in Egypt has won custody of her twin sons from her estranged husband, who had converted to Islam and claimed them according to Islamic legal precepts.

The now 15-year-old boys, however, will still be considered Muslims despite their desire to remain Christian.

On June 15 the Egyptian Court of Cassation ruled that Kamilia Gaballah could retain custody of her sons Andrew and Mario, even though the father converted to Islam and the boys' religion also changed as a result.

If the court does not allow them to return to Christianity, the family will open up another court case, said their older brother George Medhat Ramses.

"Up until now the court said they would have the right to choose their faith," said Ramses, 21. "But if they don't, we will start another trial. This is the only way."

The decision overturns a September 2008 ruling by the Alexandria Appeals court that had granted custody of the twins to their father, Medhat Ramses Labib, due solely to his conversion. During this time Gaballah lived in constant fear police would take away her sons.

The ruling also affirmed Article 20 of Egypt's Personal Status Law, which states children should remain with their mother regardless of religion until age 15, over that of the Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence, which says that a child must be granted custody to the Muslim father in an inter-religious marriage once he or she becomes 7.

But the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) advocacy group noted that while the court ruled a woman cannot be denied custody of her children solely on her Christian faith if her husband converts, children can still be removed from her home if there are "fears for the child's faith." An ex-husband or his family could easily exploit this clause, the human rights group said.

According to Gaballah, the trial was not a matter of custody rights but was religious in nature from beginning to end.

"My opponent is not only my divorcee; my opponent is everyone who hears this story and wants Andrew and Mario to become Muslims," said Gaballah, according to Copts United advocacy group.

Mario and Andrew turned 15 in June. On their 16th birthday, they must apply for Egyptian identity cards, which factor heavily into Egyptian daily life. Barring another court battle, their religion will still be registered as Muslim.

Because of this predicament, the court verdict that granted the twins' mother full custody only solved half of their problems, said Naguib Gobrael, a lawyer familiar with the case.

As registered Muslims, they could face harassment while attempting to practice their Christian faith. And while they could marry Christian women, their future children would be registered as Muslims, following the Islamic dictum that children take the religion of their father.

"The court didn't give them the right of freedom to choose their religion," Gobrael told Compass. "We must ask ourselves how the children are permitted to stay with their mother but must follow the religion of another man."

Until then the family is worried that the court will not allow Andrew and Mario to return to their Christian faith and are taking every precaution. Last Wednesday (June 24) they appealed to the Ministry of Internal Affairs to have their birth certificates state their Christian faith. They had been recently changed to retroactively show the boys' birth status as Islam.

A Longstanding Battle

The controversy began in 2007 when a court ordered the twins to take Islamic education within the Egyptian school system due to the conversion of their estranged father from Christianity to Islam.

The twins refused to take their Islamic religion exam required to pass the next grade. "I am Christian," each boy wrote on a make-up test in July. They turned in the exam with all of the answers left blank.

Their father converted to Islam and remarried in 2002. He changed the religion of his sons to Islam in 2006 and applied for custody even though he had not lived with the family. According to sharia (Islamic law) custody of minor children and influence over their religious status belongs to the Muslim parent.

The case reflects the tension in Egypt between civil and religious law. While Article 47 of Egypt's civil law gives citizens the right to choose their religion, Article II of the Egyptian constitution enshrines sharia as the source of Egyptian law. The same tension has inhibited recent attempts by other converts to change their official religious status from Islam to Christianity.

Rights groups said the court order is good news for Gaballah and the twins, but it does nothing to address discriminatory policies of Egyptian law that attach a child's faith to a parent who chooses to convert to Islam.

"It is regrettable, however, that the highest court of the country chose to treat the symptoms and ignore the root causes of the problem – changing the religious affiliation of Christian children whose parents convert to Islam without the slightest regard for their will or that of their Christian mothers," said Hossam Baghat, director of the EIPR, in a statement.

Gaballah has fought with her ex-husband over alimony support and custody of sons Andrew and Mario in 40 different cases since he left her and converted to Islam so that he could remarry in 1999.

Egypt denies right to convert to second Christian

Maher El-Gohary provides requested documents, but judge dismisses them

By Roger Elliott

Compass Direct (16.06.2009) / HRWF (19.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A Cairo judge on Saturday (June 13) rejected an Egyptian's convert's attempt to change his identification card's religious status from Muslim to Christian, the second failed attempt to exercise constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom by a Muslim-born convert to Christianity.

For Maher El-Gohary, who has been attacked on the street, subjected to death threats and driven into hiding as a result of opening his case 10 months ago, Saturday's outcome provided nothing in the way of consolation.

"I am disappointed with what happened and shocked with the decision, because I went to great lengths and through a great deal of hardship," he said.

El-Gohary follows Mohammed Ahmed Hegazy as only the second Muslim-born convert in Egypt to request such a change. El-Gohary filed suit against the Ministry of the Interior for rejecting his application in August last year.

In contrast to their angry chants and threats in previous hearings, lawyers representing the government sat quietly as Judge Hamdy Yasin read his decision in a session that lasted no more than 10 minutes, according to one of El-Gohary's lawyers, Nabil Ghobreyal.

The judge rejected El-Gohary's application even though the convert provided a baptism certificate and a letter of acceptance into the Coptic Orthodox Church that the judge had demanded.

"The judge said he will not accept the [baptism] certificate from Cyprus or the letter from Father Matthias [Nasr Manqarious]," said Ghobreyal. "Even if he gets a letter from the pope, the judge said he would not accept it, because the remit of the church is to deal with Christians, not to deal with Muslims who convert to Christianity; this is outside their remit."

El-Gohary sounded perplexed and frustrated as he spoke by telephone with Compass about the verdict.

"The judge asked for letters of acceptance and baptism," he said. "It was really not easy to get them, in fact it was very hard, but if he was not going to use these things, why did he ask for them in the first place? We complied with everything and got it for him, and then it was refused. What was the point of all this?"

A full explanation of Yasin's decision to deny the request will be published later this week. The judge's comments on Saturday, however, provided some indication of what the report will contain.

"The judge alluded to the absence of laws pertaining to conversion from Islam to Christianity and suggested an article be drawn up to deal with this gap in legislation," said Ghobreyal.

High court appeal

Such a law would be favorable to converts. Thus far, hopeful signs for converts include a recent decision to grant Baha'is the right to place a dash in the religion section of their ID cards and a High Court ruling on June 9 stating that "reverts" (Christians wishing to revert to Christianity after embracing Islam) are not in breach of law and should be allowed to re-convert.

At the age of 16 all Egyptians are required to obtain an ID that states their religion as Muslim, Christian or Jewish. These cards are necessary for virtually every aspect of life, from banking, to education and medical treatment.

No Egyptian clergyman has issued a baptismal certificate to a convert, but El-Gohary was able to travel to Cyprus to get a baptismal certificate from a well-established church. In April the Coptic, Cairo-based Manqarious recognized this certificate and issued him a letter of acceptance, or "conversion certificate," welcoming him to the Coptic Orthodox community.

El-Gohary's baptismal certificate caused a fury among the nation's Islamic lobby, as it led to the first official church recognition of a convert. A number of fatwas (religious edicts) have since been issued against El-Gohary and Manqarious.

El-Gohary's case could go before the High Court, his lawyer said.

"This is not the end; this is just the beginning," said Ghobreyal. "I am going to a higher court, I have ideas and I am going to fight all the way through. It's a long road."

Ghobreyal's tenacious attitude is matched by his client's.

"I am going to persevere, I will not give up," said El-Gohary. "Appealing is the next step and I am ready for the steps after that. I am going to bring this to the attention of the whole world."

The judge had received a report from the State Council, a consultative body of Egypt's Administrative Court, which expressed outrage at El-Gohary's "audacity" to request a change in the religious designation on his ID. The report claimed that his case was a threat to societal order and violated sharia (Islamic law).

El-Gohary's lawyers noted that the report is not based on Egypt's civil law, nor does it uphold the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights that Egypt has signed. It stated that those who leave Islam, "apostates" such as El-Gohary, should be subject to the death sentence.

Family of abducted Christian Coptic teenager assaulted by Muslim mob

By Mary Abdelmassih

AINA (09.06.2009) / HRWF (10.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org>
- Email: info@hrwf.net - In another incident of abduction and forced Islamization of Coptic minor girls, 16-year old Nermeen Mity was abducted by a Muslim man to coerce her into converting to Islam. She was successfully recovered on the same day by her family, who did their own investigation and search to locate her.



Nermeen Mity

Nermeen was abducted from El-Mahalla by Muslim Hossam Hamouda in conspiracy with his aunt Leila Attia; she was hidden away by a third person called Nasser

Abu Deif from Assuit in Upper Egypt, at the home of one of his female relatives called Rasha Soliman in Zagazig.

The success of recovering the Coptic girl led to anger, revenge and assaults from the disappointed village Muslims against her family. Nearly 150 Muslims, armed with swords and clubs, physically assaulted five family members of the abducted Coptic teenager, as they drove back to their village after being forced into reconciliation with the abductor's family by State Security, compromising their right to pursue the case any further. "With every blow on us, they chanted 'There is only one Allah' while the Police stood there watching the assault, until we could take no more and three of us were hospitalized," said Nermeen's uncle Sameh Mitry in an aired interview with Coptic News on 6/7/2009. "They dragged us out of the car saying 'Get out you followers of the Dog's religion!' They were consumed with anger ever since we got our girl back."

The police rounded up 11 Copts including the assaulted family and 14 Muslims. "The police let the real attackers go free and were just arresting people randomly," said Sameh. "We were released after 3 days except for two Copts whom the State Security held as pawns -- just in case we made any trouble they would be detained for a long time," said Sameh.

Nermeen Mitry, 16, from Toma village near El-Mahalla town, was on her way to sit for an exam on May 21, 2009, when she was lured by a Muslim female friend to go home with her where she offered her spiked tea. She regained consciousness hours later to find herself facing a bearded Muslim man trying to convert her to Islam, in a far away town and another governorate in Egypt, which she later knew to be Zagazig. The traumatized girl recounted the events to Osama Eid, correspondent of the Free-Copts Organization.

"The man was very confident and told me that I would be the fourth Coptic girl to 'know the true Allah' and convert to Islam through him. He also said that a member of my family was converted 15 years ago by him. I told him I am engaged to be married when I come of age, and would never convert to Islam as this would be a catastrophe for me. He did his best to make me change my mind, and then left me alone for a while."

When Nermeen did not return home, the Mitry family went to the police. Unable to get the police to register the case as an abduction, the family subsequently went to State Security and reported the incident, but were delayed there for hours with no progress.

"Meanwhile, one of the abductor's family members contacted Nermeen's cousin Romany and told him he knew her whereabouts, and offered to accompany him to bring her back," Sameh told Coptic News. "I am sure the abductor's family knew that we would have implicated them and they were afraid. We freed the girl ourselves; State Security did nothing to help."

On their way back with Nermeen, they were contacted by the police and were told to bring the girl to State Security Directorate. Reflecting the diminished Coptic trust in all government institutions especially State Security, "we never went there, instead we took the girl straight to a Monastery to be safe there," Sameh told Coptic News. "We know quite well what Security would have done as has happened in many cases before. If she went there, they would have changed everything, closed the case and she would have gone to the other side."

"Ever since Nermeen returned the village Muslims joining the abductor's family started a terror campaign against us and all Copts in the village in general. They harassed and taunted us by saying 'we will get your girls one by one'" said Sameh. "They burnt down Nermeen's father recycled cartons warehouse. They set it on fire at dawn and went to the mosque to pray after locking its door. We contacted the Police and implicated a few people. They were released by State Security within 4 days."

Nermeen's abduction case was picked up by several Coptic human rights Organization and brought to light. Sadly and shamefully, the news agencies in Egypt, including the foreign ones, quoted the State Security as their news source. Their story was again portrayed as a 'love story' between a Muslim man and a 19-year-old Coptic girl who eloped together for two weeks. Even the governor of Gharbiah, when interviewed on the independent TV channel Al Mehwar, denied the news of any abduction and said that the sectarian strife in Mehallah was strictly a fight between a Muslim and a Coptic family over 'rubbish collection.'

The systematic Islamization of Coptic girls has been going on for more than 30 years, Coptic Pope Shenouda protested during a conference held in Alexandria on December 17th, 1976 that "there is pressure being practiced to convert Coptic girls to embrace Islam and marry them under terror to Muslim husbands" and demanded that the abducted girls be brought back to their families.

Policemen sentenced to only five years for killing

Compass Direct (08.06.2009) / HRWF (09.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Two policemen convicted of killing a Christian in Giza, Egypt have received only a five-year prison sentence for what lawyers are calling the cold-blooded murder of a Copt who stood up for his rights.

The Giza Criminal Court sentenced the two policemen for manslaughter on May 25 for the 2007 death of Nasser Gadallah, 39. Police say he jumped out of a window in an effort to escape, but family members who were eyewitnesses said the officers beat Gadallah and pushed him out the window in intentional murder because he was a Christian who had filed a complaint against police.

The court, however, determined Gadallah died from the officers beating him, and that they did not intend to kill him.

"The court did not punish them [more severely], because from its point of view the officers didn't kill him," said family lawyer Nadia Tawfeeq. "They just beat him, and when they beat him he died."

Gadallah, a plumber, was walking home from work on Aug. 3, 2007 when a police officer, Amir Sobhi, stopped him and took all the money on him, 280 Egyptian Pounds (US\$50), and his mobile phone. Recognizing Sobhi because he had previously harassed him, Gadallah filed a police report against him citing the most recent and previous extortion incidents. Sobhi was suspended from duty for four days while police investigated the report.

A source said Gadallah's wife told him not to file the complaint, saying they did not have power and would be unable to defend themselves. In Egypt, police corruption is rampant, according to local sources.

"But it is a known fact that Copts are definitely picked on more, because they are Christian," said a source. "They are peaceful people and simply don't know how to ask for their rights."

After midnight, in the wee hours of Aug. 7, 2007, two cars full of police officers, along with Police Investigations Officer Ahmed Alnawayy, arrived at Gadallah's home but found the gate of the family apartment complex locked. The five policemen broke into the

neighbor's home and beat him before they jumped over a wall into the Gadallah home complex.

After beating Gadallah's brothers and father, the officers broke into his third-floor apartment and beat him, and two of them threw him out a window onto the street as his wife and children looked on, according to Tawfeeq.

"In their minds, he shouldn't have complained because he was a Copt," said Tawfeeq.

According to Gadallah's widow, Mariam Gadallah, who saw the officers beating her husband, one of the officers said to him, "You are Coptic. You have no value."

"The judge didn't believe her," said Tawfeeq of the widow's testimony. "You know the man is a Christian, so they did not consider it murder."

Tawfeeq confirmed that the court gave the two policemen who threw him out the window a lenient sentence because it determined that Gadallah's cause of death was complications due to beating.

The lawyers said that Alnawawy gave the order to the officers to kill Gadallah. According to a neighbor's account, one of the officers ran out of the building to Alnawawy saying: "We killed the guy, we killed the guy," said Tawfeeq.

Seeing his body on the ground, neighbors attacked one of the police cars, while some of the officers in the other vehicle managed to escape.

Although most facts and witnesses point to direct orders of Alnawawy, the court freed him of complicity, said prosecuting lawyer Naguib Gobrael.

"There were instructions from Alnawawy," Gobrael said. "The police can't do anything without him."

Mariam Gadallah, left with three children ages 2 to 8 and no viable source of income, said she was disappointed in the court's soft sentence and the lack of compensation to the deceased's family.

With irritation in her voice, she said, "I think the sentence is very lenient."

Lawyers applied for an appeal to the federal attorney general last week calling for a re-classification of the killing as "willful, premeditated, and deliberate." Gobrael said they also plan to also file a lawsuit against the internal minister for allowing five officers to leave their post at the police station during work hours to attack Gadallah in his home.

"I see this decision as very weak and not suitable for this crime," Gobrael said. "This crime is a killing, not a beating."

Five-year sentence for police officers who threw Christian Copt out of window

Compass Direct (28.05.2009) / HRWF (29.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Giza Criminal Court has handed down yesterday a five-year prison sentence to the two Police constables who killed the Copt Nasser Gadallah, by throwing him out of a window.

The Gadallah family's legal team objected to this lenient sentence, and asked the Court to reclassify the charge as 'wilful, premeditated, and deliberate killing.'

Attorney Dr. Naguib Gibraeel, advised that he will appeal to the Prosecutor General against this court ruling, on grounds of an error in the application of the law. According to him the charge should have been classified as 'deliberate and premeditated killing', which is punishable by the death penalty, and even in case 'premeditation' is eliminated, then the sentence ought to carry a life imprisonment with hard labour.

"Investigations proved that the perpetrators raided the victim's property and entered his home, meaning that the intent to murder was premeditated. Besides the Autopsy report confirmed injuries and breakage to the skull ending with a bump, accompanied by a collapse in the circulatory system proving that death came as a result of either being thrown or falling from a window. Also witnesses have stated categorically that the Investigations Officer Ahmed Alnawawy was present at the crime scene and fled after seeing the fall of the victim" explained Gibraeel.

Many people were outraged when the facts of the Coptic plumber's killing came out and how he was brutally and cold-bloodedly thrown out of his window by the police, for refusing to drop charges of extortion against a police constable. Also the handling of the murdered Copt's trial raised many questions about the impartiality of the Prosecution services.

The murdered 39-year old Coptic plumber, Nasser Gadallah, had filed in August 2007, a police complaint against police constable Amir Sobhi accusing him of extorting from him 280 Egyptian pounds and his cell phone and that there were previous extortion incidents by him. Amir Sobhi was suspended from duty for four days pending inquiries.

At 4'oclock in the morning of 7th August 2007, Police Investigations Officer Ahmed Alnawawy went to Gadallah's home in a vehicle full of constables from Omrania Police station, Giza. Three of the constable broke into his apartment and demanded that he withdraws his complaint against their colleague Sobhi. According to his 37-year old wife, Mariam Mounir Ayoub, Nasser told the police that he would be ready to do so, provided he got his money and cell phone back. This was rejected by the constables. "After failing to convince him of dropping his charge, they started hitting him with sticks, pushed me out of the way, tied his hands and threw him from the window of our fourth floor apartment, in front of our kids. All this because he demanded his rights; he lost his life because he dared ask for his rights." said his widow.

Before killing the plumber, the police constables went into his family's apartment in the same building, threatened his four sisters, tied the hands of his two brothers Gad and Ishac, before beating them up. 'By the time we freed ourselves, our brother was already lying dead in the street," said his 27-year old brother Ishac.

When the incident happened, in an effort to cover up, a spokesman for Giza Police Force, gave the media another version which they stuck to and which was surprisingly picked up later by the Prosecution. They said that the police were called to the area due to heavy fighting breaking out there; a police force arrived to the scene, arrested five suspects, and was chasing two others, one of whom (meaning the plumber) tried to jump from his window to the next house before falling during the attempt, even though he was not wanted for arrest.

Police brutality in dealing with Nasser and his family prompted angry neighbours who had congregated at the scene to assault the police, injuring four of them. During the funeral, thousands of mourners marched chanting anti-police slogans, accusing police of brutality and murder," reported the independent AlMasry AlYoum newspaper.

When the trial of the Copt started in May 2008, Nasser's legal team, and human rights organizations were very critical at the way it was being handled.

Prosecution indicted only two constables (as scapegoats) on charges of 'assault leading to death ' a crime which carried between 4 to 7 years imprisonment. The Investigations Officer Ahmed Alnawayy was completely excluded from the Indictment, and was named only as a witness, in spite of proof against him, in addition to the two defendant Constables giving evidence that they went to the Coptic plumber's apartment acting on his orders. One of the main witnesses was never called to give evidence, and the prosecution insisted that the police had no hand in Nasser falling to his death, as he was trying to run from the police by jumping from one window to another (the nearest window is 12 metres away) when he lost balance and fell to his death.

It is worth noting that the penniless Gadallah's family, consisting of his wife, three children and an 80 year-old mother, following their lawyer's advice, had to relinquish their right of bringing charges against the Investigations Officer as a main suspect, as this would have prolonged the case by bringing it back to the Prosecution, and they could not afford a delay in compensation payment. It was reported that they are in dire need of compensation because the victim was the only source of income for his family and that they are presently living on donations from charitable people.

Attorney Dr. Naguib Gibrael stressed that he will demand a compensation sum of 2,000,000 from the Interior Ministry as the convicted Constables Maher Hussein and Hassan Mohamed are part of the police force, and this crime took place while they were 'on duty'.

Two Egyptian Copts re-arrested in Abu Fana murder

Christians fear police coercing them to drop charges of Muslim attack on monastery

By Michael Larson

Compass Direct (29.05.2009) / HRWF (05.06.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Police this month released two Copts wrongfully arrested for killing a Muslim during an attack on Abu Fana monastery in Egypt in May 2008, but then re-arrested them as part of an intimidation campaign against Christians, their lawyer said.

More worrisome to the Christians in custody is that their fate most likely will be decided outside of the justice system, in "reconciliation meetings." The state prosecutor investigating the case has not announced the results of his findings on the true identity of the murderer, as he is awaiting the outcome of the out-of-court talks between Copts and local Muslims.

Brothers Refaat and Ibrahim Fawzy Abdo have been incarcerated for a year. On May 3 the two brothers were released on bail, but the Minya State Security Services issued a new detention order and had them arrested on May 20 for "security reasons." Egyptian security forces can incarcerate people without reason according to provisions in criminal law.

A criminal court in Cairo ordered the release of the Fawzy Abdo brothers twice, but each time the interior ministry issued another arrest order. Advocacy groups say the interior ministry is working with local police and the investigating officer to keep them detained, force a confession and make the Copts look guilty in the Abu Fana attack.

"Police arrested them for reasons of 'security concerns' in spite of no evidence," said Ibrahim Habib, chairman of United Copts of Great Britain. "They are comforting Islamists by scapegoating Christians."

The two men worked as building contractors on the walls of Abu Fana monastery in Upper Egypt when nearly 60 armed Muslim residents attacked it in May 2008. The attack left one Muslim dead and four Christians injured, and two of three monks briefly kidnapped were tortured.

Five days after the attacks, security forces arrested the Fawzy Abdo brothers, charging them with murder. In November they were sent to El Wadi El Gadid Detention Camp near the Egypt-Sudan border and tortured as authorities tried to extract a false confession of murder, their lawyer said.

Minya Gov. Ahmed Dia el-Din claimed the Muslim murdered at Abu Fana was killed by one of the brothers from 80 meters away. But the Coptic brothers' lawyer, Zachary Kamal, told Compass that an autopsy showed a bullet fired from a short distance.

The two men have faced extreme conditions in prison such as solitary confinement and broken teeth from beatings, and they have not been allowed to see their families, who are undergoing extreme hardship. Refaat Fawzy Abdo has six children and Ibrahim Fawzy Abdo has seven; both Christians are the breadwinners of their households.

Reconciliation Instead of Justice?

Reconciliation meetings with area Muslims continue with the participation of Coptic businessmen, the diocese of Mallawi, a Member of Parliament and attorney Kamal, all under the auspices of the police.

Such meetings are somewhat customary in Egypt, in which different parties come together to settle legal matters out of court. They carry a social purpose of restoring faith and communal harmony in the face of sectarian tensions.

Kamal said he was not opposed to a reconciliation meeting instead of normal judicial channels, but that terms of the discussion were unacceptable. Authorities want the brothers to admit to the murder of the Muslim and the Copts to pay compensation to the victim's family.

"They want the Copts to accept guilt, but that means they will carry the blood of the victim the rest of their lives," Kamal said.

Other Copts worry that the meetings are a substitute for administrative justice, and that police are using the brothers as a bargaining tool to force Abu Fana's monks to drop charges against local Muslims and call off the investigation of the attack.

"The brothers are still held because they are being used as a negotiation chip," said Samia Sidhom, English editor of Egyptian Christian weekly Watani. "The reconciliation efforts are to make the monks change their testimony. If they do that, the brothers will be released."

Sidhom said that Coptic church leaders entered into negotiations with local Muslims and politicians and gave up their legal rights because obtaining justice in the Islamist-tilted Egyptian legal system is very difficult.

"Typically a Copt or their buildings are attacked, and the only way for the police to avoid punishing the culprits is through these reconciliation meetings, where the Copts give up any legal rights they have," Sidhom said.

State officials, however, said the Copts are superimposing religious persecution claims onto a simple argument over property. The Minya governor said the attacks were not religious but were provoked by a long-standing land dispute between the monks and local Bedouins.

Whether the monastery attack started as a land dispute or not, the findings of secular rights groups revealed that in the course of the violence, attackers tied two of the kidnapped monks to a palm tree, whipped and beat them, and forced them to spit on a cross and give the confession of Islam, according to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights.

Motives for the May 2008 attacks against the monastery, located 200 kilometers (124 miles) south of Cairo, are still unknown. Coptic advocacy groups claim the attacks were motivated by growing hostility against Egypt's Christian community.

Stabbing, bombing attacks strike near two churches in Egypt

Copt leaving sanctuary knifed in Minya; bomb explodes near venerable structure in Cairo

By Roger Elliott

Compass Direct (22.05.2009) / HRWF (23.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - In separate attacks in Egypt earlier this month, a Coptic Christian suffered severe stab wounds as he left a worship service in Minya, and a car-bombing outside a venerable church in Cairo disrupted a wedding.

Without provocation, three Muslims repeatedly stabbed Coptic Christian Girgis Yousry, 21, as the army conscript was leaving the gates of the church of Saint Mary in Minya, Upper Egypt on May 2, according to Copts United.

The assault left him with severe injuries to internal organs, and he was taken to the district hospital, where he was still receiving treatment at press time.

When Yousry's father went to the police station to report the attack, the Intelligence Services officer in charge threw him out of the station. Three men implicated in the stabbing, Wael Mohammed Hagag, Mohammed Nasr Anwar and Shabaan Sayed Amin, were arrested on May 5 and have been given a 16-day initial incarceration while the investigation is underway.

All three men stand accused of attempted murder without premeditation, which carries a sentence of five to 15 years.

But Mamdouh Nakhla, president of the Al-Kalema Centre for Human Rights, said he thinks it unlikely that they will be convicted.

"From my experience over the last 15 years, in Minya in particular, all cases of attacks and murder against Christians either went without punishment and [the accused] were totally exonerated, or they were given suspended sentences," he said.

Home to Egypt's largest community of Copts (approximately 4 million), Minya is considered a hotbed of anti-Christian violence.

"I am aware of severe injustices happening to Christians who are being incarcerated for no reason," said Nakhla. "This is my experience of Minya."

Local sources told Compass that in the last few months there has been a wave of arrests of Christians who are held with no official charges. Sources spoke of cases where detainees are held for months in prison, where they are badly beaten and tortured.

"Police brutality is a widely practiced policy," said one source, "especially in rural areas, group punishment and systematic intimidation and humiliation are expected practices against all citizens, Christians included."

This month Compass learned of three illegal arrests of Christians that have taken place since November 2008. Two of the men who were detained have since been released.

"When people are released, they have been beaten and electrocuted so that they are hardly standing up," said a local Christian.

Local church leaders believe recent pressure is a response to rumors of an increase in Christian converts in Egypt due to Christian satellite programming, although arrests go beyond converts to Coptic-born Christians.

Makeshift Bomb

In Cairo, a makeshift bomb placed under a car exploded outside a renowned Catholic church building in Zeitoun district on May 9, incinerating the vehicle but causing no injuries.

Panicked passersby called police when the small explosion caused the car to burst into flames outside Saint Mary Church, which Egypt's Coptic community, citing numerous sightings of the Virgin Mary there in the late 1960s, considers a holy site.

Security forces arrived at the scene within minutes and sealed off the area. They found a second bomb, also planted beneath a car. Unable to disarm it, they were forced to detonate it in a controlled fashion, sources told Compass.

The explosion interrupted a wedding and a Bible study that were taking place inside the revered, historic building. Those in attendance were evacuated through a side gate as a precaution, reported Egyptian newspaper Watani. Boutros Gayed, the church's priest, was unavailable for comment.

The bombs were rudimentary. Cell phones were used as detonators and placed with the explosive material into a bag containing shrapnel.

Police have yet to release information about possible suspects or motives, but newspaper Al-Masry Al-Youm has stated security forces are investigating possible links to a Hezbollah cell, which uses similar explosive devices.

A spokesman for Hezbollah has denied its involvement, stating that the cell was focused on supporting Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and has never had plans to carry out operations in Egypt.

The head of the Orthodox Church, Pope Shenouda, condemned the attack as criminal and pointed to sectarian motives.

"[The bombers] are attempting to tamper with the future of this homeland that they do not deserve to belong to," he said, according to Egyptian newspaper Al-Ahram.

Similarities between this event and an explosion in February outside Al-Hussain Mosque, where one person was killed and 24 others wounded, have led to speculation that the attacks may be part of an attempt to inflame sectarian tensions.

Rumors also have been spread that "extremist Coptic groups" may have planted the devices in order to attract U.S. President Barack Obama's attention to their plight on his planned June 4 visit to Cairo.

"This sounds like a ridiculous suggestion, because the Copts do not even respond to attacks against them," said Ibrahim Habib, chairman of United Copts of Great Britain. "It is not in their agenda, and they have no precedence of violence."

Convert's religious rights case threatens Egypt's Islamists

Muslims said to fear that freedom to legally change religion would wreak societal havoc

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct (12.05.2009) / HRWF (13.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - In the dilapidated office here of three lawyers representing one of Egypt's "most wanted" Christian converts, the mood was hopeful in spite of a barrage of death threats against them and their client.

At a court hearing on May 2, a judge agreed to a request by the convert from Islam to join the two cases he has opened to change his ID card to reflect his new faith. The court set June 13 as the date to rule on the case of Maher Ahmad El-Mo'otahsem Bellah El-Gohary's - who is in hiding from outraged Islamists - and lawyer Nabil Ghobreyal said he was hopeful that progress thus far will lead to a favorable ruling.

At the same time, El-Gohary's lawyers termed potentially "catastrophic" for Egyptian human rights a report sent to the judge by the State Council, a consultative body of Egypt's Administrative Court. Expressing outrage at El-Gohary's "audacity" to request a change in the religious designation on his ID, the report claims the case is a threat to societal order and violates sharia (Islamic law).

"This [report] is bombarding freedom of religion in Egypt," said lawyer Said Faiz. "They are insisting that the path to Islam is a one-way street. The entire report is based on sharia."

The report is counterproductive for Egypt's aspirations for improved human rights, they said. In the eyes of the international community it is self-condemned, the lawyers said, because it is not based on Egypt's civil law, nor does it uphold the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights that Egypt has signed.

The report stated that those who leave Islam will be subject to death, described El-Gohary as an "apostate" and called all Christians "infidels."

"During the hearing, they [Islamic lawyers] were saying that Christians are infidels and that Christ was a Muslim, so we said, 'OK, bring us the papers that show Jesus embraced Islam,'" Faiz said, to a round of laughter from his colleagues.

Ghobreyal, adding that the report says El-Gohary's case threatens public order, noted wryly, "In Egypt we have freedom of religion, but these freedoms can't go against Islam."

The trio of young lawyers working on El-Gohary's case, who formed an organization called Nuri Shams (Sunlight) to support Christian converts' rights, said they have received innumerable threats over the phone and on the Internet, and sometimes even from their colleagues.

Churches Challenged

To date no Christian convert in Egypt has obtained a baptismal certificate, which amounts to official proof of conversion.

Churches fear that issuing such certificates would create a severe backlash. As a result, converts cannot apply for a change of religion on their ID, but El-Gohary was able to travel abroad to get a baptismal certificate from a well-established church. In April a Coptic Cairo-based priest recognized this certificate and issued him a letter of acceptance, or "conversion certificate," welcoming him to the Coptic Orthodox community.

El-Gohary's baptismal certificate caused a fury among the nation's Islamic lobby, as it led to the first official church recognition of a convert. A number of fatwas (religious edicts) have since been issued against El-Gohary and Father Matthias Nasr Manqarious, the priest who helped him.

"The converts have no chance to travel, to leave, to get asylum, so we have to help them to get documents for their new religion," Fr. Manqarious told Compass by telephone. "So I decided to help Maher El-Gohary and others like him. They can't live as Christians in broad daylight."

For several months El-Gohary has been in hiding, relying on others to meet his basic needs. When Compass spoke with him by phone earlier this month, he said he lives in fear for his life and worries about his 14-year-old daughter's safety.

"I'm hiding. Someone brings me my food and water. I haven't gone out in a week," said El-Gohary. "Many Muslims and sheikhs ... say if anyone sees Maher Gohary, he must kill him. My life is very difficult."

His original case, filed in August of last year, included an attempt to change the religious affiliation on his teenage daughter's ID, but he later dropped it after further legal consultation. El-Gohary said that when radical Muslims recognize his daughter on the streets, they warn her that they will kill her father when they find him.

"She's afraid for me," he said.

His church acceptance letter has re-kindled discussion of a bill proposed by parliamentary members affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, a hard-line Islamist opposition movement, which would make apostasy punishable by death, said El-Gohary's lawyers. Human rights experts, however, say that such a bill does not stand a chance in the Egyptian Parliament and is primarily a smokescreen to induce fear in Egypt's Christian converts from Islam.

Some Hope from Baha'is

Sources said the fact that the judge asked for a baptismal certificate and filed the letter of acceptance in the case represents progress in the ongoing struggle of Egyptian converts, who are not recognized in their own country.

Now that El-Gohary's lawyers have produced the acceptance letter, the judge in the case finds himself in a bind, said Hassan Ismail, general secretary of the Egyptian Union of Human Rights Organizations.

"The judge is in a paradox with the document he asked for," Ismail said. "It is difficult to accept it, and yet it is difficult having this document among those of the case."

Ismail, who has worked for years defending the rights of both Baha'is and converts, said it is hard to predict what the judge will decide in June. Even with all the required documents and "proof" of El-Gohary's conversion, he said, the judge may still deny his right to change religions.

"For us human rights activists, these decisions are political, not legal," he said. "These sorts of documents put the government into a corner, and we are working hard to get them in order to push the government to make different decisions."

At the age of 16 all Egyptians are required to obtain an ID that states their religion as Muslim, Christian or Jewish. These cards are necessary for virtually every aspect of life, from banking, to education and medical treatment.

Baha'is, who do not fall under the rubric of any of Islam's "heavenly religions," were forced to lie about their religion or not obtain cards until March, when in a historical decision Egypt's Supreme Administrative Court upheld a lower court's 2008 ruling that all Egyptians have a right to obtain official documents, such as ID cards and birth certificates, without stating their religion.

The gains of Baha'is have been a gauge of sorts for the Christian convert community, even though in reality they are not granted the freedom to change their stated religion or leave it blank on their cards and the official registry.

"I'm very optimistic about the cases of minorities and converts in Egypt," said Ismail. "I believe that the case of Baha'is was an indicator for converts ... If we were able to push their case, then we can defend the rights of converts."

The human rights activist said that although discrimination against converts who are seen as apostates from Islam is greater than that against those raised in other religions, ultimately converts will be able to gain legal ground. El-Gohary's case, he said, will play an important role.

"After years of fighting, the Baha'is have rights," he said. "I think converts will succeed even if it takes years. Many are expecting to see Maher's case [succeed], because it's well documented."

Attorney Ghobreyal said that El-Gohary's case is on solid legal footing based on Article 46 of the Egyptian Civil Code, which grants religious freedom to the country's citizens.

In his mind it is irrational that the government gave rights to the Baha'is, who fall outside of the three heavenly religions, while not granting the same rights to Christian converts. His only explanation is that a governmental green light to people to leave Islam could wreak havoc.

Not only is there fear of the Muslim front reacting violently to such a decision, but "they're afraid that if they allow it, then all Muslims will become Christians," said

Ghobreyal. "They know there are many converts, and they will all officially become Christians."

The lawyer said there are rumors circulating that there are a few million converts eagerly awaiting the results of El-Gohary's case. Egypt's last census in 2006 did not factor in religion, so figures of the Coptic population are based on estimates. These range from 6 to 15 percent of the country's 80-million population. It is not possible to estimate the number of converts, most of whom live in secrecy.

"Ten years ago, you never heard about a convert, but now you hear that someone is going to the court to ask to become a Christian," said Ghobreyal.

Hegazy's Hope

The first convert to file for a change on his ID card, Mohammed Ahmed Hegazy, said he was pleased with the progress of El-Gohary's case and hoped that more converts would take the risk of joining their cause.

"I think that every case added to the convert case will be a help," said Hegazy.

An outspoken critic of the refusal of Egypt's established churches to openly baptize converts, Hegazy said that in El-Gohary's case publicity and criticism pushed the church to take a step in the right direction in producing the conversion certificate.

"But this is not a big step, and there are many more that need to be taken and have not been," he said. "Just to be clear, the [Egyptian] church has not given a baptism certificate, it has given an acceptance letter, and the church has declared they are not going to give a baptism paper ... but we can't deny that the step that the priest took to give the certificate was audacious."

Hegazy, who lost his case in January 2008 and is waiting for an appeal date, was never able to get a baptism certificate, nor can he travel since he does not have a passport. If he returns to his hometown to apply for one, he risks losing his life.

He said he still hopes any of Egypt's churches will help him by baptizing him and giving him a certificate in time for his appeal or for a new case he plans to open soon. Hegazy said that although his case is not as public as it used to be, he still faces danger when he leaves his house.

Although he is also in hiding and fears for his life, El-Gohary said he hopes his case opens the way for other converts to experience freedom.

"I hope this for all of those who want to live in the light and the sun; there are many families," he said of Egypt's converts. "I want to live in peace as a Christian. I hope my country gives me the freedom to worship my God and gives me my human rights."

Egypt is a member of the U.N. Human Rights Council, an inter-governmental body made up of 47 states responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe. On April 18, 2007, in its written statement applying for a seat to the Human Rights Council, the representative of Egypt to the U.N. stated that if elected it would emphasize promoting cultural and religious tolerance, among other human rights.

Bomb attack targets Cairo church, no one injured

EarthTimes (11.05.2009) / HRWF (12.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net – A primitive bomb exploded near a Coptic church in Cairo late on Sunday night but there were no injuries, the Egyptian Interior Ministry confirmed on Monday. The ministry said two cars near the St. Mary church in the Cairo neighbourhood of Zaitun were damaged in the explosion.

Police said they had defused a second bomb that had been rigged to be detonated remotely. Police cordoned off the area and were investigating the incident, the Interior Ministry said.

Crowds have thronged to the church yearly for decades in the hope of seeing an apparition of the Virgin Mary. Visitors said she had appeared there several times in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

According to government figures, Christians comprise about 10 per cent of Egypt's approximately 80 million people. The rest are mostly Sunni Muslims.

Tensions periodically flare up over perceived slights to each other's religion or land disputes.

In April, four Muslim gunmen opened fire on a group of Coptic Christians, killing two and wounding one, as they were leaving church in the southern Egyptian governorate of Minya.

The incident took place on Saturday night as Coptic Christians were celebrating Easter in a church vigil.

At the time, a source in Egypt's security services told the German Press Agency

Two Christian Copts detained for third time in Egypt

By Mary Abdelmassih

AINA (21.05.2009) / HRWF (22.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Two Christian Copts, brothers Refaat and Ibrahim Fawzy Abdo, who were falsely accused last May of killing one of the militant Muslim raiders on the Abu Fana, Monastery, have been detained for a third time.

In spite of having been released again by a court ruling this month and the Ministry of Interior losing its appeal against this ruling, Minya State Security Services issued a new detention order, and the brothers were transferred back yesterday for the third consecutive time, to the New Valley detention camp. They were awaiting the implementation of the Court verdict to release them at the Minya prison.

"Each time the court rules in their favor, the State Security issues a detention order, to circumvent the courts' rulings, and sends them back to the New Valley detention camp, near the borders with Sudan," says activist Wagih Yacoub of the Middle East Christian Association (MECA).

"Why is the State Security adamant to detain them 'politically', although their case is an ordinary criminal one and in spite of having been already released on bail by court since January 2009. This case is not subject to political detention which is reserved for those who pose a threat to public security and the State?" asks Yacoub.

Nader Shoukry of Copts-United says: "The state security is now putting pressure on the families of the Coptic Abdo brothers to leave town, which they rejected, since it is not possible after detaining the brothers for a whole year, to also make their families homeless."

The majority of Coptic activists believe that the Coptic brothers, who have been detained for almost a year, despite being released twice by the courts, have been pushed into this case by the State Security, as 'scapegoats' to draw the attention from the scandal of the Arab attack on the 4th century Abu Fana Monastery last May; a scandal which shocked the world and gave rise to angry Coptic demonstration in all the western cities.

The Abdo brother's attorney, Zakary Kamal, insists that they are the victims in the 'balancing act' used by the State Security whenever sectarian strife breaks out.

Some observers believe that all the government efforts have been directed from the start to support the Governor of Minya's untrue version of events, and that the authorities are using the brothers as leverage against the Coptic Church to make them state that the attack on the Monastery was not religiously motivated, which the Church leaders are refusing to do.

When the story of the attack and the torturing of the monks first broke out the Minya Governor Ahmed Dia Eldin provocatively stated publicly that the attacks were not sectarian, in an effort to downplay the incident. He said that the incident was "an ordinary quarrel over disputed land between neighbors," and that "fire was exchanged on both sides." These allegations were openly denied by the Church leaders who asserted that 'no monks ever keep weapons.' The Egyptian government still insists until today on this version of the Governor's story.

During the investigations in June 2008, the security police subjected the two Coptic brothers Refaat and Ibrahim, to electric shocks for 8-hours daily over a period of three days, in order to extract from them false testimony against the monks of the 'Abu Fana' Monastery that they were in possession of weapons which they (the monks) used during the Arab attack. In spite of the continuous torture, the two men refused to testify falsely against the innocent monks. The younger brother Ibrahim also lost his teeth as a result of continuous hitting on his face by the interrogators.

When all kinds of torture failed to force them to falsely incriminate the monks, the two brothers, were falsely charged with arms possession and the murder of one of the Muslim assailants on the Monastery, named Khalil Ibrahim Mohammed, despite the government forensic report proving that the dead man was shot in the back and that it is impossible for the two brothers to be the culprits.

The monks and witnesses have testified that Refaat was not in the Monastery at all that day, and his brother Ibrahim went to get a deposit from the Monastery, because he and his brothers are the paid contractors to build the badly-needed wall around the Monastery, to fend off the continuous Arab attacks.

During the attack on the Monastery, Ibrahim and his 6-year old daughter who accompanied him, hid for 3 hours until the attack ended. During an interview, Ibrahim told reporters that the police officer who came to the Monastery to investigate the incident after the attack, asked him about his brother's whereabouts, and he told him that his brother was in Mallawi purchasing supplies for the celebrations of the Holy Family's visit to Egypt at St. Mary's Monastery in Samaloot.

In order to frame Refaat, the officer asked Ibrahim to phone his brother and ask him to come to the Monastery because the officer wanted to speak with him, which he did and his brother came to the Monastery, from where he was taken to the police station.

Ibrahim Fawzi Abdo lodged a complaint, accusing head of Mallawi Police Station's Investigations of unjustly arresting his brother Refaat . The price of this complaint was his freedom also, as he was later arrested and joined his brother Ibrahim in prison.

During the barbaric attack last May on the Abu Fana Monastery in Mallawi, Minya Province, the 18th in the series of Arab attacks on it, the Arab assailants who were armed with automatic rifles, destroyed and burnt property, including two on-site churches, monk's cells and crops on monastic farmland, estimated to be worth in excess of one million pounds. Five monks and two monks-in-training. were seriously injured during this attack.

The Arabs also kidnapped three monks and kept them overnight, subjecting them to torture by severe beating, whipping, and breaking their limbs. The attackers asked them to spit on the cross and to give the confession of Islam. When the monks refused, the beatings and humiliation increased. One of the monks who had his leg and arm broken by the kidnapers, was put on a donkey, released into the desert to his fate and was told to crawl back to the Monastery.

"Although the Arabs know that Refaat and Ibrahim are innocent, they tried unsuccessfully to extort 5,000,000 Egyptian pounds from the Coptic Church in exchange for testifying in favor of the two Copts during unofficial 'Arab Reconciliation' meetings last November which were attended by some members of the Egyptian Parliament and Coptic businessmen from the region. However, those meetings failed as the Church would not give in to this kind of extortion," said the Coptic brother's attorney, Kamal Zakary.

According Nader Shoukry of Copts-United, the Arab attacker know among themselves who the real killer is, and several quarrels already broke out between them due to the mistake of one of them which lead to the killing of their Muslim son."But the policy of the Security authorities in all sectarian strife, to which we are by now accustomed to, insist on making out of the Monastery attack just a 'dispute' and the victims are the Coptic contractor and his brother who have been used as 'scapegoats' to cover up the scandal of the attack on the Monastery." "To date, none of the individuals responsible for the attack, kidnap and torture of the Abu Fana monks has been brought to justice, and the criminal file is still open. The state security insist that the monks should to go back on their testimony, which they decline, as in their opinion this would be going back on the truth," Shoukry commented.

"The question is, until when will the State Security continue to put pressure on the Copts to force an unfair settlement for the Abu Fana Monastery attack? The real offender, Arab chief Samir Abu Louli and his bandits are free at large while Refaat and his brother Ibrahim are behind bars, only for saving the wounded monks by transporting them in cars to hospital?" asks Meca activist Wagih Yacoub

Most Coptic activists including Yacoub blame the Coptic and international human rights organizations for neglecting the case of those two helpless Copts, who are fighting alone against the arbitrariness of the Egyptian State Security.

Outspoken Meca activist Wagih Yacoub, who operates from inside Egypt and who was detained without reason or charges for three months in November 2007, asks "are we going to do something positive to free this 'hero' and his brother or are we just going to issue statements and appeals?"

Bomb attack targets Cairo church, no one injured

EarthTimes (11.05.2009) / HRWF (16.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net – A primitive bomb exploded near a Coptic church in Cairo late on Sunday night but there were no injuries, the Egyptian Interior Ministry confirmed on Monday. The ministry said two cars near the St. Mary church in the Cairo neighbourhood of Zaitun were damaged in the explosion.

Police said they had defused a second bomb that had been rigged to be detonated remotely. Police cordoned off the area and were investigating the incident, the Interior Ministry said.

Crowds have thronged to the church yearly for decades in the hope of seeing an apparition of the Virgin Mary. Visitors said she had appeared there several times in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

According to government figures, Christians comprise about 10 per cent of Egypt's approximately 80 million people. The rest are mostly Sunni Muslims.

Tensions periodically flare up over perceived slights to each other's religion or land disputes.

In April, four Muslim gunmen opened fire on a group of Coptic Christians, killing two and wounding one, as they were leaving church in the southern Egyptian governorate of Minya.

The incident took place on Saturday night as Coptic Christians were celebrating Easter in a church vigil.

At the time, a source in Egypt's security services told the German Press Agency

Egypt's swine destruction threatens Coptic-run industry

Government vows to continue slaughter in spite of international criticism

By Roger Elliott

Compass Direct (05.05.2009) / HRWF (11.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net – Authorities yesterday pressed ahead with the slaughter of Egypt's pigs – crippling the livelihood of thousands of swine breeders, nearly all Coptic Christians – in spite of World Health Organization (WHO) criticism that the measure was unnecessary for fighting the A(H1-N1) flu strain.

No cases of the so-called "swine flu" have been reported in Egypt, but the government last week ordered the slaughter of the country's pigs as a precautionary measure, which Copts saw as an attack on the minority Christian population. After WHO criticized the move as unnecessary, the government rebranded the slaughter as "a general public health measure."

Egyptian human rights lawyer Nadia Tawfiq told Compass the pig slaughter was a form of attack on Christians.

"All of that business is Christian," she said. "You know that for Muslims, the devil is in the pig."

An estimated 300 to 400 residents of the Manshiyat Nasr area of Cairo, nearly all of them Coptic, took to the streets on Sunday (May 3) and set up blockades to try to keep government teams from removing their animals. The protest took place in an area where mostly Coptic Christian scrap merchants known as zabaleen raise pigs to eke out a living.

The protesters threw stones and bottles at riot police, who reportedly responded with rubber bullets and tear gas. Eight protesters were reportedly hurt, including two that were bloodied as police dragged them away.

An estimated 250,000 mainly poor Christians in Cairo reportedly make their living from collecting garbage and raising pigs in slum areas.

The government's decision to destroy as many as 400,000 pigs was also lambasted by the United Nations as having little or no warrant, fueling speculation that the directive was motivated by the Islamic prohibition of pig consumption and the fact that Egypt's pork industry is run almost entirely by Copts.

"They were not so radical against the birds [during the bird flu scare] as they are now against the pigs," said the president of the Society for the Protection of Animal Rights Egypt, Amina Abaza. "We would like to ask them, 'Why?' Is there a special reason?"

A U.S.-based Coptic rights group has condemned the slaughter as a deliberate targeting of defenseless Christians and a continuation of a long campaign of discrimination against the Coptic community.

"Destroying these families' livelihood without proper compensation is a clear example of discrimination and a violation of human rights, because it directly threatens the existence of an already impoverished population," the Coptic Assembly of America said in a press statement.

Copts make up 10 to 12 percent of Egypt's population, and although the community comprises some of Cairo's richest residents, it also includes some of the nation's poorest.

Those in the pig industry say that the slaughter cannot be justified on health grounds; they note that their livestock are healthy and pose no hygienic threat.

"Health comes first, absolutely," said Helena Morcos of Morcos Charcuteries, a delicatessen with four branches in Cairo and its own small breeding farm. "Health comes before business, money, everything. If it had been proven there was a danger with the pigs, we would have slaughtered them readily."

Animal rights activist Abaza, who is a Muslim, said she has no qualms about protecting pigs and knows likeminded people who are willing to help.

"Why are we so eager to destroy such a fortune and the people who live with their pigs?" she said. "I think we should give them a chance to raise their pigs in better circumstances with better food. I even have persons who are ready to pay for this, and I am one of them."

Ripple Effect

The government has denied that the swine slaughter is related to Muslim prohibitions against pork, saying that more hygienic pig farming will begin in two years using imported animals.

Confusion over proposed compensation for the slaughtered swine was compounded by the sentiment that any amount would not equal the sustained livelihood that breeding pigs provides.

The state-run Al-Ahram newspaper suggested that pig owners would receive 1,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$180) per head, but there were varying reports about how much the government would actually pay and under what conditions.

"I called the chief vet, and he said they were paying 100 pounds [US\$18] for a mature pig, and 50 [US\$9] for a baby," said Abaza. "The real cost of a mature animal is 1,000 Egyptian pounds, so look at the loss."

Egypt's agricultural minister has suggested that meat from butchered pigs could be sold, thus rendering compensation unnecessary. This idea is impractical, said pig breeder and delicatessen owner Morcos.

"We are not well experienced in freezing this large an amount of meat," said Morcos. "We are not sure if many storage houses would agree to rent space for the storage of pork."

As pigs are considered "unclean" in Islam, finding that freezer space outside of the Christian community might be hard work. Were this possible, there would still be the problem of a saturated meat market and the resulting fall in profits.

Egyptian officials have begun killing hundreds of pigs and maintain that they will continue the slaughter in spite of international criticism, including WHO's statement that pork is safe to eat.

Girgis Youssef Boulis, head of pork producer Ramsis Meats, told The Associated Press that the slaughter will result in layoffs in the largely Christian-run industry, affecting the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands farmers, producers and meat delivery drivers, among other industry workers.

Although the pig keepers will feel the effects of the slaughter most keenly, Morcos told Compass that businesses such as hers, which offers a wide range of pork products, will also suffer.

"How is this affecting us?" said Morcos. "It could ruin our business."

Convert in Egypt arrested for marrying Christian

Couple goes into hiding as police place Islamic law over Egyptian penal code

By Michael Larson

Compass Direct (23.04.2009) / HRWF (05.05.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Christian convert Raheal Henen Mussa and her Coptic husband are hiding from police and her Muslim family for violating an article of Islamic law (sharia) that doesn't exist in the Egyptian penal code.

Police arrested Mussa, 22, on April 13 for marrying Sarwat George Ryiad in a customary marriage (zawag al `urfi), an unregistered form of matrimony in Egypt made without witnesses. It has gained popularity among Egyptian youth but is not sanctioned by most Islamic scholars.

The two signed a marriage contract between themselves. Only Ryiad and their attorney have a copy. Police have not obtained a copy of the contract, but they used its existence as a pretext for arresting Mussa.

According to a strict interpretation of sharia, Muslim women are not permitted to marry non-Muslim men, although the opposite is allowed, and Article 2 of the Egyptian Constitution stipulates that sharia is the basis for legislation.

The two have not committed a crime according to Egyptian law since they didn't seek official marriage status, but police and Mussa's family are pursuing them because they violated Islamic law, advocacy groups say.

"They have not violated the law, but the family and the police are applying their own unwritten law," said Helmy Guirguis, president of the U.K. Coptic Association. "Islamic law interprets that if a Muslim girl marries a non-Muslim man, even on paper, they are breaking the law of God, not the law of man."

The two could not get married in an official ceremony since Mussa is considered a Muslim by birth, and changing one's religious status away from Islam is impossible in Egypt. A lawsuit is pending, however, for a Muslim-born man to change his status on his identity card.

Formerly known as Samr Mohamed Hansen, Mussa converted to Christianity three years ago, before marrying Ryiad. Police arrested her as she came home from her workplace at a Cairo salon. They identified her by the Coptic cross tattoo on her right arm – a common mark among Copts.

She was transferred to a station operated by the secret police, where she stayed until Sunday (April 19), when her family took her. While in their custody, her family completely burned off her cross tattoo, according to the U.K. Coptic Association.

Mussa escaped from them on Tuesday (April 21). She and her husband fled Cairo and are in hiding. If the two are caught, advocates fear, they could be forcibly separated, arrested and beaten, with Mussa being returned to her family.

Sharia influence in Egyptian law also means that Muslims have the right (hisbah) to file a lawsuit against someone who has violated the "rights of God." This provision, advocates fear, means Mussa and Ryiad's unsanctioned marriage could make them targets of Muslim extremists wishing to apply the full extent of this law.

The most famous example of hisbah's application came in 1995, when Cairo University professor Nasr Abuh Zayd was declared an "infidel" and forcibly divorced from his wife for criticizing orthodox views of the Quran.

Ryiad and Mussa were not married in a Coptic ceremony, as many churches avoid marrying registered Muslims to non-Muslims for fear of being targeted by authorities and Islamic extremists.

"Nobody [in Egypt] can declare the marriage of a Coptic man to a Muslim girl," attorney Naguib Gabriel told Compass. "It would be very dangerous to the life of a priest."

Marriage Woes

Mussa and Ryiad's case is the latest in a spurt of recent arrests and lawsuits against those who don't adhere to the Islamic-influenced dictum that Muslim women may not marry non-Muslim men.

In October 2008, a Cairo court handed Father Metaos Wahba a five-year prison sentence for issuing a marriage certificate to a Christian man and a Muslim convert to Christianity. He stated that he did not know the woman's papers stating her religion as "Christian" were a forgery.

Human rights groups have called on Egyptian President Hosny Mubarak to release Fr. Wahba, as Egypt is a signatory to the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which allows full religious freedom, including conversion.

Mussa's jailing mirrored that of Christian convert Martha Samuel Makkar, 24, detained last December at a Cairo airport for attempting to flee the country with her husband. She was charged with carrying forged documents that listed her religion as Christian and incarcerated for a month.

A judge granted her bail, but not before threatening to kill her for leaving Islam. (see www.Compassdirect.org, "Judge Tells of Desire to Kill Christian," Jan. 27).

Nadia Tawfiq, the lawyer in charge of Makkar's case, said many arrests and trials in Egypt result from laws that assign people social status according to the religion on their identity cards.

She said the best hope for change is a May 2 court hearing of Maher El-Gohary, a Muslim-born man who is fighting to have his Christian religion recognized on his official documents. If he succeeds, he would be the first person in the country to be granted that right.

Christians killed in Egypt feud

BBC (20.04.2009) / HRWF (22.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Two Christian men have been shot dead after an Easter vigil in the south of Egypt, security sources say.

Another Coptic Christian was reported injured in the attack near the village of Qena.

Police are searching for four Muslim men suspected of having carried out the shooting, which is thought to have been the consequence of a family vendetta.

A security source quoted by Reuters said those killed had recently been freed from prison for killing a Muslim.

Vendettas are common among clans in southern Egypt, being pursued equally bitterly within faith communities as between Christians and Muslims.

Coptic and Orthodox Christians marked Easter on Sunday, a week later than their Catholic and Protestant counterparts.

Copts account for about 10% of Egypt's 80 million population.

Egyptians win the right to drop religion from ID cards

By Liam Stack

The Christian Science Monitor (20.04.2009) / HRWF (22.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Egyptian followers of the Bahai religion celebrated a long-awaited legal victory last week when the country's Interior Ministry allowed them to obtain national identity cards without falsely listing their faith as one of the only three recognized by the state.

Rights activists say the ministry's decision to honor a court ruling allowing Bahais to leave their religion off their official documents is an historic first step towards a more inclusive definition of what it means to be Egyptian.

"It is a significant development in our legal history as a nation," says Hossam Bahgat, director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, which filed a lawsuit against the Interior Ministry's Civil Status Department on behalf of Bahai citizens. "It is the first legal institution to sanction, or even accommodate the idea that you can be Egyptian and follow a religion outside the three recognized ones."

All Egyptians are required to obtain a national ID card at age 16. The card states their religious affiliation, and since 2000 there have only been three options: Muslim, Christian, and Jewish.

The cards are necessary for accessing almost all aspects of life in Egypt, from opening a bank account to immunizing children.

Those who follow a faith besides the three the state refers to as "the heavenly religions" were previously either forced to lie about their religion or go without the cards, consigned to a bleak state of official nonexistence.

But on March 16, Egypt's Supreme Administrative Court upheld a lower courts' 2008 ruling that all Egyptians have a right to obtain official documents, such as ID cards and birth certificates, without stating their religion.

The Interior Ministry had appeared not to recognize the 2008 ruling, and Bahais had reported trouble registering their children in schools and universities.

But the ministry issued the new order March 19 complying with the Supreme Administrative Court's decision, and it went into effect April 15. Authorities say new IDs will be available within two weeks.

Under the new rules, Egyptians can opt to have a dash mark printed in place of a religion.

Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, called the former policy "abusive" and "without any basis in Egypt's statutory law," in a statement released when the new policy went into effect.

"We hope this means that the government intends to eradicate all policies that discriminate on the basis of religion and instead promote freedom of belief for all Egyptians," he said.

Problems with documents began recently

The Bahai faith was founded in 19th-century Persia by the prophet Baha'ullah, who taught the spiritual unity of all mankind and embraced the teachings of many faiths, including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism. He also believed himself to be the last in a line of prophets that included Buddha, Abraham, Jesus, and Muhammad, which contradicts the Islamic position that Muhammad was the final prophet of God.

Egyptian Bahais long lived peacefully beside their Christian, Muslim, and Jewish countrymen. That began to change in the 1950s, when some in Egypt became suspicious of the fact that the Bahai world headquarters are located in the Israeli city of Haifa.

Egypt's Bahai citizens say they began having problems obtaining official documents in 2000, after an effort to modernize the Interior Ministry instituted a computerized system of issuing ID cards, ending the old practice of hand-writing them.

Violence toward Bahais

"Before that there were no problems, they used to write out Bahai or just put a dash," says Labib Iskander, a professor of mathematics at Cairo University and follower of the Bahai faith. "My old card still says Bahai, and to this day I still have not gotten a new one. Now when I do there will be a dash."

But the ruling comes at a tense time for the nation's Bahais, and recent violence directed at them suggests that popular attitudes have yet to catch up with those of the government.

In late March a riot broke out in the southern Egyptian town of Al Shoroneya after a satellite TV station aired a segment on Bahais celebrating the Iranian New Year with a picnic in a Cairo park.

One of the picnickers identified himself as a resident of the village and described it using a phrase in Arabic that could either mean "there are many Bahais there" or "everyone there is Bahai."

Eight Bahai residents' homes were set ablaze in the riot, and local media reports indicate the town's entire Bahai population has fled.

Dr. Iskander is happy about the government's new policy but says that old attitudes die hard, noting that the state is still unwilling to write the word "Bahai" itself on the national identity cards.

"They think that writing it would mean recognizing it as a religion, but that's not true," he says. "It would mean recognizing that some people are just different, and that they believe in something else. But they don't want to do that."

Egypt's Coptic church issues first conversion certificate

Key move in former Muslim's bid to legally convert comes as Islamist outcry peaks

By Roger Elliott

Compass Direct (14.04.2009) / HRWF (15.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - In a bold move, Egypt's Coptic Church has issued its first-ever certificate of conversion to a former Muslim, supporting his petition to have his national identification card denote his Christian faith.

Maher Ahmad El-Mo'otahsem Bellah El-Gohary's request to legally convert is only the second case in Egypt of a Muslim-born citizen trying to change his religious affiliation to Christianity on identification documents. Lawyers presented the Coptic Church's conversion certificate to a court clerk on Saturday (April 11).

"We know that the judge has seen the certificate, but we have no indication whether it is acceptable or not," said Nabil Ghobreyal, one of three lawyers representing El-Gohary. "We will have to wait until May 2 to find out the final verdict."

Reluctance to expose itself to possible retaliation from either the government or Islamic extremists has kept the Coptic Church from openly admitting to baptizing and welcoming converts until now.

There is indeed reason to fear reprisal.

"Intimidation from the Islamic lawyers is severe," said El-Gohary in a recent interview. "They were chanting in the court, 'No god but Allah,' and they were threatening intensely."

Despite efforts to maintain the secrecy of El-Gohary's whereabouts, he has received written death threats on more than one occasion since appearing in court on April 4 to register an official statement.

Since the certificate was issued, some bloggers have used strong and abusive language to support Islamist lawyers Mustafa El-Alshak'a, Hamid Sadiq and Youssef El-Badri in their threats against El-Gohary's lawyers and the priest that issued the certificate, Father Matthias Nasr Manqarious.

As the representative of a community already heavily persecuted, the Coptic Church is in a precarious position. Despite the risks, however, it endorsed the certificate issued by Fr. Manqarious. Bishop Marcos of Shubra El-Kheima declared that the church cannot turn down a fellow believer who is looking for acceptance into the Christian community.

Whether the conversion certificate will turn out to be the final piece of the puzzle that opens the door for El-Gohary to officially convert remains to be seen.

Gamal Eid of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, who represents Mohammed Ahmed Hegazy, the first Muslim-born Egyptian to request a legal conversion, is no stranger to the pitfalls of such a case.

"We support freedom of thought, but we believe also that the government and the court will try to stop this, because if the door is open there will be huge numbers following," Eid said.

El-Gohary characterized the judge's request for the document as laying the onus for legal conversion on the church, describing it as "an excuse to wiggle out of making a decision."

His lawyer, Ghobreyal, said he hopes that Judge Hamdy Yasin will allow El-Gohary to change his religious status now that the certificate has been issued.

For El-Gohary, threats from Islamic fundamentalist elements are now the foremost issue.

"I do not leave the house – my life is in real danger and my daughter is in real danger," said El-Gohary. "The pressure is too much. I am thinking seriously that I should leave Egypt."

El-Gohary and his lawyers are now calling for protection from both national security forces and the international community.

Egyptian court rules in favour of Bahais

By Ramadan Al Sherbini

GulfNews.com (16.03.2009) / HRWF (24.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - An Egyptian court on Monday ordered the government not to force the Bahais to indicate a certain religion on their official documents.

The Supreme Administrative Court upheld an earlier ruling, which gives this minority the right to get their identification cards without having to mention Islam, Christianity and Judaism - the only three faiths recognised in Egypt.

The ruling puts an end to a five-year legal battle between the Egyptian government and the followers of Bahaim in this predominantly Muslim country.

"This ruling scraps the governmental policies, which used to force Bahais to change their faith in order to get official documents," said Adul Ramadan, an official at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, a non-governmental group, which filed the lawsuit.

"The significance of this verdict is that it not only ends the suffering of hundreds of Bahai citizens, but also marks a victory for civic rights for all Egyptians, who must be treated equally before the law regardless of their religious faiths," he added.

The number of Bahais in Egypt is estimated at 2,000. Due to their faith, they were unable to get official documents, including IDs and birth certificates, which are necessary in Egypt to have access to healthcare and education.

Another Christian in Egypt murdered on pretext of harrasing Muslim female

Assyrian International News Agency (11.03.2009) / HRWF (12.03.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - For the second time in less than a week, a Copt has been abducted, tortured for 9 days, killed and thrown into the Nile, on pretext of harassing a Muslim girl.

Police Investigations confirmed that the victim was lured to his death by a Muslim girl. The heinous crime was committed by a Muslim killer who posed as a police officer, deluded his partners in crime under the pretext that his sister was harassed by the Coptic victim.

Inhabitants of the village Kafr Naim, not far from the village of Dmas where a similar incident happened last week, found a body floating on the waters of the Nile. The male body's feet and hands were tied with rope in a squat position, and his face and head bandaged.

Investigation confirmed that the body belonged to 28-year-old Copt Wagih Maurice Barzi -- who was missing from home for 15 days. His mother Blanche, Naguib -- 54 years -- identified the body of her son by his clothing.

Police investigations tracked the victim's phone, which was stolen, to a mobile phone dealer in Cairo, who admitted that he bought it from a police officer.

Descriptions were identical with one of the 'friends' of the victim "Basem A." -- 31 years - - a former airline steward and presently supermarket owner in the town of Benha.

The police raided the supermarket where they found belongings of the Coptic victim. Police arrested "Ahmed. A." - 16 years - and "Sami. M" - 51 years - who worked for the friend of the victim.

The accused admitted that the supermarket owner told them he was police officer. After police intensive interrogation they confessed that they imprisoned the victim and tortured him as "courtesy" to the police officer, who convinced them that the Coptic victim had a relationship with his sister against her will.

They also confessed that he brought to them a girl called "Asmaa M" -- 21 years -- to lure the victim. The accused said the girl managed to lure the victim to a place close to the supermarket, then they (the accused) assaulted him, accompanied by 7 others, claiming to be the girl's family.

They detained the victim and tortured him for 9 days, before taking him to the village of Kowesna, Menoufia. They tied him with ropes and threw him into the Nile, the accused added.

Prosecution ordered the detainment of the accused for four days pending investigations, the arrest of the main defendant, as well as the 7 unidentified persons who helped in the abduction of the Copt.

The victim's body was released for burial and delivered to his family.

This incident caused sectarian tension among the Coptic and Christian communities. Church leaders in Meet Ghamr showed their anger at the repetition and increase in the Coptic killings.

Egypt persecutes Muslim moderates

By Ahmed Subhy Mansour

Int'l Herald Tribune (23.01.2009) / HRWF (12.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Many Americans do not realize that there is a war being waged in Egypt against Muslim reformers. These reformers call themselves "Koranists" because they focus solely on the Koran and advocate a modern interpretation of Islam that rejects Shariah law.

These self-declared leaders of the "Islamic Reformation" number in the thousands and are connected globally through the Internet. For nearly a decade, as this movement has gained momentum, they have come under increased attack from the Egyptian government for their religious ideas. Al Azhar University, which is based in Cairo and is the leading center for conservative Sunni learning in the world, has rejected the views of the Koranists and has sought to systematically dismantle the movement.

To curry favor with this influential religious establishment, the Egyptian government has brutally cracked down on members of the Koranist movement, leading to the imprisonment and torture of over 20 members and the exile of many more. This unique collaboration between the government and Islamic traditionalists refutes current claims by the state that Egypt is secular and that it is working to fight extremism and terrorism. In the latest effort to destroy this fledgling reform movement, a young Koranist blogger named Reda Abdel Rahman was arrested on Oct. 27 and charged with "insulting Islam." Rahman's popular blog criticizes the religious establishment - largely based on his training at Al Azhar. His blog calls for widespread religious and political reform in Egypt

and the larger Muslim world. According to Rahman's lawyers, his arrest was requested by the head of Al Azhar after Rahman refused to suspend his blog. He was then detained and tortured in an unknown location for over a month until international pressure forced the government to disclose his whereabouts.

"The Egyptian security position against Reda is incomprehensible" said Heba Abdel Rahman, Reda's sister. "They allow visits to the families of Muslim Brotherhood detainees, but they would not allow us the same rights. When we protested they pointed their guns at us, threatened to open fire, and threw us out of the police station."

Six local human rights organizations have volunteered to defend Reda and sent lawyers to his interrogation. "It was like an inquisition from the Middle Ages," said Ahmed Samih, head of the Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti-Violence Studies. "The Egyptian general prosecutor was asking Reda whether he prays or not, how he prays, and why he denies some of the Sunni traditions."

Prominent Egyptian activists like Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim blame the Egyptian Emergency Law for the human rights abuses characterized by Rahman's arrest. The law, which was enacted after the assassination of President Anwar Sadat, effectively suspended the Constitution and allowed the government unprecedented powers. While the government insists that the law is important in the fight against terrorism, Ibrahim asserts that it is being used instead to limit the freedom of reformers.

"The government promised to use emergency laws only in terrorism cases," he said. "The irony is that the Emergency Law is now being used against bloggers who use the Internet to fight terrorism!"

In a surprising twist, the Egyptian High National Security Court has ordered Rahman's release. Despite this ruling - and the unprecedented statement by the court that "arresting people solely on the basis of their religious beliefs is not acceptable" - Rahman remains in prison.

This refusal by the state to execute the court's order is clear evidence of the collaboration between Egypt's security establishment and the religious institutions against any reform. Islamic reformers in Egypt face severe political obstacles in their efforts to confront religious extremists. It is important that the United States and the international community reaffirm their support for Reda and his fellow Muslim reformers in order to ensure that those fighting for an "Islamic Reformation" are successful.

Ahmed Subhy Mansour is president of the International Quranic Center in Washington.

Egyptian Christians sent to prison after brutal police raid

Judge ignores video evidence of officers' unwarranted, violent attack on café

By Roger Elliott

Compass Direct (29.01.2009) / HRWF (02.02.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Following a brutal raid on six Christian brothers and their café because they had opened for business during Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, a judge on Jan. 22 sentenced them to three years in prison with hard labor for resisting arrest and assaulting authorities.

Last September, 13 police officers raided the café in Port Sa'id, a city in Egypt's Nile delta, overturning tables, breaking chairs and smashing glasses and hookah pipes,

according to the Coptic Christians' lawyer. They beat the brothers with sticks, leaving two with broken arms and a third needing 11 stitches for a head wound.

"The police attacked these people and assaulted them unjustifiably," said Ramses el-Nagar, the Christians' lawyer. "Police did not want to see people eating during Ramadan. This is unfair, because whatever people's beliefs are, the law is something else and they should not be mixed."

There is no law in Egypt under which the brothers could be prosecuted for opening their café during Ramadan. When they tried to defend their café, the brothers, all in their 30s, were arrested on Sept. 8 and charged with resisting arrest and assaulting authorities. They were held for 30 days before being released on bail, set at 12,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$2,173).

At the trial last week, defense counsel showed a video of the incident shot by an onlooker as evidence of police brutality. The footage did not sway Judge Mohammed Hassan El-Mahmody, prompting some Coptic activists to claim religious zeal and prejudice as the true motives behind the convictions.

"The police very often pressure the Copts to accept unfair situations," said El-Nagar. "Unfortunately, with the power of the police and Egypt being a police state, we don't have the inclination to take the police to court."

The names of the imprisoned Christian brothers are Ashraf Morris Ghatas; Magdy Morris Ghatas; Osama Morris Ghatas; Nabil Morris Ghatas; Walid Morris Ghatas; and Hany Morris Ghatas.

Ibrahim Habib, chairman of advocacy group United Copts of Great Britain, told Compass that Egypt needs to take certain steps for progress toward justice.

"What we would like to see is the government implementing the law, showing fairness, maintaining total separation between the state and religion, and removing the second article from the Egyptian constitution," which makes Islamic law the source of statutory law, he said. "We would like to see Egypt free and treating all citizens equally."

El-Nagar has 30 days to appeal the decision before the Court of Cassation, a high appeals tribunal. He said he plans to do so.

Egyptian judge tells of desire to kill Christian

Bail granted to convert from Islam barred from legally changing religious ID

By Roger Elliott

Compass Direct (27.01.2009) / HRWF (27.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - After her arrest at Cairo's airport on Dec. 13 while attempting to flee anti-Christian hostilities in Egypt, convert Martha Samuel Makkar was granted bail on Saturday (Jan. 24), but not before a judge took her aside and said he would like to kill her, according to her lawyer.

Attorney Nadia Tawfiq said Judge Abdelaa Hashem questioned Makkar extensively about her Christian faith during the hearing. Makkar, charged with forging identification documents, explained her reasons for her conversion, avowing her Christian faith and repudiating the judge's claims that converting from Islam to Christianity was impossible.

"Then he said, 'I want to talk with Martha alone,' so we all left the room, and he said to her, 'Nobody changes from Muslim to Christian – you are a Muslim,'" Tawfiq said. "And she said, 'No, I am a Christian.' He told her, 'If I had a knife now, I would kill you.' [Makkar] came out crying and depressed, but at least he gave the decision to let her go free."

Makkar, 24, had planned to escape the dangers she has faced in Egypt by travelling to Russia with her family. She says that since converting to Christianity five years ago, police and members of her extended family have threatened her incessantly, the relatives vowing to kill her.

Airport security personnel had been notified of Makkar's plans, according to a Coptic rights group.

"They had both [her original and Christian] names and maybe a picture before she reached the airport," said Helmy Guirguis, president of the UK Coptic Association. "They did not [arrest her] to apply the law, they did it because of hate for Muslims converting to Christianity. It is like a great occasion to go and arrest some poor lady like her in the airport."

After her arrest, Makkar was charged with carrying forged documents and taken to El-Nozha police station. Authorities also took her husband and two children into custody. The identification that Makkar carried listed her religion as Christian and bore the name she had chosen for herself rather than her given name, Zainab Said Abdel-Aziz.

Legal conversion from Islam to Christianity by Muslim-born Egyptians, and gaining corresponding legitimate documents, is unprecedented in Egypt. Egyptian law does not provide for a means to legally change one's religion on identification papers.

According to Tawfiq, Makkar said authorities held her in a room at the airport, hit her and denied food to her children.

"People who convert to Christianity are treated exactly like terrorists," said Guirguis of the UK Coptic Association. "This is not official policy, it's not on paper, it's not the law, but it's what happens."

Abuse from police, prisoners

Before authorities took Makkar to prison, her two children, Morkes, 2, and Amanwael, 4, were handed into the care of family friends. Authorities took Makkar's Christian husband, 32-year-old Fadl Thabet, to the national security office in Alexandria for questioning.

The prosecution office later ordered his release after testimony from Makkar, who claimed that Thabet did not know she was a convert. Despite this order, authorities did not release Thabet but instead placed him under "emergency arrest." This form of incarceration requires no charges and provides no recourse to legal counsel. He remained in prison until Jan. 19.

Authorities had also arrested George Abyad, 67, and Masood Guirges, 55, employees of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate in Alexandria, on suspicion of helping Makkar obtain false papers. The prosecution office ordered their release along with that of Thabet based on Makkar's testimony.

Since Makkar's arrest, she has leveled allegations of sexual abuse and demeaning behavior at police in the El-Nozha station and at personnel of the national security office in Heliopolis. Makkar said she has also suffered at the hands of fellow inmates at Al-Qanata prison, where authorities later took her.

"She has some difficulty with the other prisoners in prison," said Tawfiq. "One of them kicked her and tried to kill her; one took the Bible and threw it on the floor, pushed her and tried to make her go back to Islam. But she is strong, she is strong."

Makkar remained in pre-trial detention until Thursday (Jan. 22), when she was briefly released on a bail of 3,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$540). She was then rearrested after prosecutors filed an appeal. The appeal failed, and on Saturday (Jan. 24) Makkar was allowed to return home to her husband and children pending trial.

Tawfiq and two other lawyers, Nabil Azmi and Magdy Shounda, will represent Makkar when her trial resumes before a different judge. Tawfiq, however, is not hopeful that they will face any less of a bias.

"I think it will be the same, because all the judges are Muslim and are naturally upset about that [conversion]," she said.

Egyptian wins rare legal victory to revert to Christianity

Copt who became Muslim, then returned to Christ, gets 'new' faith officially recognized

By Michael Larson

Compass Direct (08.01.2008) / HRWF (12.01.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - An Egyptian convert to Christianity who spent 31 years officially identified as a Muslim has won a rare legal victory to be officially registered in his "new" faith.

An Alexandrian administrative court awarded Fathi Labib Yousef the right to register as a Christian at a Dec. 20 hearing in the Mediterranean coastal city.

Yousef, in his early 60s, was raised Coptic but converted to Islam in 1974 in order to divorce his Christian wife. Becoming Muslim typically allows for an easy nullification of marriage to a non-Muslim within sharia (Islamic law), and conversion is often employed for this reason by both men and women in Islamic countries.

He reverted to Christianity in 2005 after an Orthodox clerical council gave its official permission, according to the advocacy group US Copts Association.

Yousef applied to the civil registry to acknowledge his change of religion the same year. But the government refused to acknowledge his re-conversion, so he filed a lawsuit against the Egyptian prime minister, interior minister and Civil Status Organization chairman.

The court awarded him the right to revert to Christianity since it is his right according to Egyptian civil law, said Peter Ramses, an attorney familiar with Yousef's case.

Ramses said this case is an important development for Egypt to live up to freedoms promised in the constitution. Unfortunately this verdict does not represent a legal sea change, he said, but rather the correct decision of an individual judge.

"We only have some judges giving these decisions," he said. "In Egypt we have many judges who don't work by the law, but by sharia."

And Yousef is not assured that his official religious identity will stand. His attorney, Joseph Malak, said other Egyptian Christians have won the right to return to Christianity only to see government officials stop implementation.

"The stumbling block is the police or civil registry office could refuse to carry it out on paper," he said. Other measures that could block implementation, he said, include appeals against the decision by courts "infiltrated by Muslim fundamentalist ideologies."

Last year Egypt's top administrative court allowed 12 converts to Islam to return to Christianity, but the decision was appealed before the country's Supreme Constitutional Court.

The court was going to rule in November concerning the legality of reversion to Christianity, but its decision has been postponed indefinitely. If the court had upheld the decision, Egyptian converts to Islam would have had the constitutional right to return to Christianity.

But for now, victories such as Yousef's depend on the will of each judge.

"It means every judge issues a ruling at their own discretion, [even though] the law in existence is in favor of these people," said Samia Sidhom, English editor of Egyptian Christian weekly Watani.

Changing an official religious identity from Islam to any other religion in Egypt is extremely difficult. While Article 47 of Egypt's civil law gives citizens the right to choose their religion, Article II of the Egyptian constitution enshrines sharia as the source of Egyptian law.

Traditional interpretation of sharia calls for the death of Islamic "apostates," or those who leave Islam, but in Egypt legal authorities give somewhat more flexibility to those born and raised as Christians before converting to Islam.

Yousef decided to return to Christianity as a matter of religious belief and doubts about Islam, his lawyer said.

Ramses said he hopes to see more decisions in favor of Christians wanting to revert to their religion. He said many in Egypt convert to Islam not for religious reasons, but to secure a divorce, attain higher social status or marry a Muslim.

Religious reversion cases are difficult to win, but far more difficult is for Muslim-born converts to Christianity to officially change their religion, although a few have tried. One such person is Maher Ahmad El-Mo'otahsem Bellah El-Gohary, a convert with an open case at the State Council Court to replace the word "Muslim" on his identification card with "Christian."

El-Gohary, 56, has been a Christian for 34 years. His case is only the second of his kind in Egypt. Muhammad Hegazy filed the first in August 2007, but his case was denied in a January 2008 court ruling that declared it contrary to Islamic law for a Muslim to leave his religion.
