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Blast kills 21 outside church in Alexandria, Egypt

Bomb explodes as Christians leave New Year's Eve mass

By Wayne King

Compass Direct (03.01.2011) / HRWF (04.01.2011) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - At least 21 people were killed and scores were wounded on Saturday (Jan. 1) when a bomb outside a church in Alexandria, Egypt exploded as congregants were leaving a New Year's Eve Mass celebration.

The explosion ripped through the crowd shortly after midnight, killing instantly most of those who died, and leaving the entrance-way to the Church of the Two Saints, a Coptic Orthodox congregation, covered with blood and severed body parts.

The blast overturned at least one car, set several others on fire and shattered windows throughout the block on which the church is located.

Egyptian authorities reportedly said 20 of the victims have been identified. At least 90 other people were injured in the blast, 10 seriously. Among the injured were eight Muslims. Many of the injured received treatment at St. Mark's Hospital.

Burial services for some of the victims started Sunday (Jan. 2) in Alexandria, located in northern Egypt on the Mediterranean Sea.

Witnesses reportedly said a driver parked a car at the entrance of the church and then ran away seconds before it exploded. Government officials have claimed they found remnants of the bomb, filled with nails and other make-shift shrapnel, at the site; they suspect an unidentified suicide bomber, rather than a car bombing.

No one has claimed responsibility for the bombing, but the attack comes two months after an Islamic group known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) issued a threat stating that, "All Christian centers, organizations and institutions, leaders and followers are legitimate targets for the muhajedeen [Muslim fighters] wherever they can reach them."

Claiming they would open "rivers of blood" upon Christians, the group specifically threatened Egyptian Christians based on an unsubstantiated rumor that two Coptic women, both wives of Orthodox clergy, were being held against their will after converting to Islam. The statement came after ISI claimed responsibility for an attack on a Baghdad church during mass in which 58 people were killed.

The Egyptian government continues to suspect foreign elements mounted the Alexandria attack, but an unconfirmed report by The Associated Press, citing anonymous government sources, said an Egyptian Islamic group is being investigated.

Bishop Mouneer Anis, head of the Episcopal Diocese of Egypt, said in a written statement that he thinks the attack was linked to the Iraqi threats. He added that his church has taken greater security measures at its downtown Cairo location.

"We pray with all the people of Egypt, Christians and Muslims, [that they] would unite against this new wave of religious fanaticism and terrorism," he said.

For weeks before the ISI issued its threat, Alexandria was the site of massive protests against the Orthodox Church and its spiritual leader, Pope Shenouda III. Immediately after Friday prayers, Muslims would stream out into the streets surrounding mosques, chant slogans against the church and demand the "return" of the two women. Before that, as early as June, clerics from at least one central Alexandria mosque could be heard broadcasting anti-Christian vitriol from minaret loudspeakers during prayers, instructing Muslims to separate themselves entirely from their Christian countrymen.

The Alexandria bombing comes almost a year after a shooting in Nag Hammadi, Egypt left six Christians and one Muslim security guard dead. In the Jan. 6, 2010 attack, a group of men drove by St. John's Church, 455 kilometers (282 miles) south of Cairo, and sprayed with gunfire a crowd leaving a Coptic Christmas Eve service.

Three men were eventually charged with the shootings, but the case has yet to be resolved.

Egypt wasn't the only place in the Middle East plagued with anti-Christian violence over the holiday season.

The day before bombers struck the Alexandria church, an elderly Christian couple in Baghdad was killed when terrorists placed a bomb outside of their home, rang the doorbell and walked away, according to media and human rights reports. The bombing happened at the same time other Christian-owned homes and neighborhoods throughout Baghdad were being attacked.

Estimates of the number of people wounded in the attacks in Iraq range from nine to more than 13.

Copts rally At Egyptian Supreme Court, demand release of detainees

AINA (06.12.2010) / HRWF (07.12.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Dozens of Copts and a number of Muslims protested on December 4th in front of the Supreme

Court in Cairo to call attention to the use of deadly force by State Security against Coptic protesters, which occurred on November 24 in Talbiya, Giza. The clashes between Copts and security forces resulted in 4 Coptic deaths as well as 120 injuries (AINA 12-3-2010).

Protesters demanded the release of all detainees, including children and minors, and called for the resignation and prosecution of the Governor of Giza and the Chief of State Security in Giza, "who gave orders to open fire on the unarmed Coptic protesters," said Dr. Naguib Ghobrial, head of the Egyptian Union for Human Rights Organization, who organized the rally.

The protesters held photos of those who died and those who were arrested in the demonstrations. They also held banners and chanted slogans against the Governor, who is viewed by many as being responsible for the incident by assuring the Church congregation, less than 24 hours before sending security forces to storm the church, that he had changed the permit and congratulated them on the new church.

One banner said "it is easier to get a permit for a nightclub than a church in Egypt."

Ghobrial explained to the media that Copts are unable to build a church without the consent of supreme executive and security authorities, especially the State Security service which is the one entrusted with the approval of the building of any church.

Unlike Muslim citizens, who only need a municipal license to build mosques, the Copts require presidential approval for a church, based on the 1856 Ottoman Hamayoni Decree, in addition to ten humiliating conditions laid down by the Ezaby Pasha Decree of 1934, before being considered for a presidential decree. These include the approval of the neighboring Muslim community.

Dr. Ghobrial said that it was not possible that a government treats its citizens according to two standards. "Muslims enjoy building their mosques without any fuss while Christians go through a grueling bureaucratic procedures just to build toilets in a church, or get a Presidential decree to build a church."

The Demonstrators called on President Mubarak to support the passage of a unified law for building places of worship, which experts believe would eliminate sectarian strife. Seventeen years ago Coptic Pope Shenouda III proposed to the parliament speaker the unified law for building places of worship. However, the bill languishes in Egypt's parliament, which session after session delays putting it on its agenda.

The incident of the church in Talbiya gained the sympathy from the Muslim inhabitants of the area, who for the large part refused to join security forces in their attacks against the Copts.

"For the first time we were joined by Muslims in the rally," said Ghobrial. "We wanted to relay a message to the government to change its treatment of the Copts, who ought to be treated equally to Muslims."

After the demonstration Ghobrial presented a legal memorandum to the Attorney General Abdel Meguid Mahmoud and Interior Minister Habib al-Adli, calling for the release of the prisoners and detainees of the Talbiya incident as soon as possible.

"We told him that it is impossible that the anniversary of the Christmas Eve Massacre of January 6, 2010 comes and our children are detained in the Egyptian prisons," said Ghobrial. "Or maybe this is another Christmas gift from the government" (AINA 1-7-2010).

Dr. Ghobrial said that the Attorney General promised to release the detainees "as soon as possible."

By Mary Abdelmassih

Muslim mob in Egypt firebombs Christian homes, businesses

Rumor of romance with Christian sends hundreds into destructive frenzy

By Wayne King

AP (29.11.2010) / HRWF (30.11.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Christians in a small village in southern Egypt are rebuilding their lives and homes after hundreds of Muslims rampaged through their community firebombing houses and businesses over rumors of a romantic relationship between a Christian and a Muslim.

At least 23 homes and numerous businesses, all Christian-owned, were damaged or destroyed in the village of Al-Nawahid in Qena Governorate, 454 kilometers (282 miles) south of Cairo. Five people were injured, two seriously.

The attack devastated the Christians of Al-Nawahid, said Badier Magdy Demetry, 22.

"It has affected us in every way, financially, physically, spiritually – everything," Demetry said. "My brother saw the house after it was burnt down, and he fainted. He couldn't believe what happened to the house. Everybody is living in sadness and desperation."

The attack started on the evening of Nov. 15 when a throng of hundreds of Muslims poured onto the streets chanting "God is great!" while brandishing swords, knives, meat cleavers and shooting rifles in the air, according to Ra'fat Samir, a human rights activist in Luxor.

The mob moved to four streets in the village where some 40 homes owned by Christians are huddled together. The Christians fled as the crowd approached.

"People started to run away from their houses, from the top of their roofs to the house next door, so they could escape with their wives and children," Demetry said. "Then they attacked us and set the houses on fire – more than 20 houses."

Others were too afraid to leave their homes when they heard the gunfire, rights activist Samir said.

"When they knew there was an attack, they all started to hide," he said.

Five people who couldn't run quickly enough were injured, according to Samir. Two 87-year-old men suffered head injuries, and the rest had injuries to their arms and shoulders, he said.

The mob pelted the homes and businesses with rocks and then looted them. They then torched the buildings with Molotov cocktails and bombs made out of propane tanks. Numerous shops were destroyed along with a grocery store and a business that sold animals to butchers. Also destroyed were farms and two water pumps worth more than US\$20,000 each. The pumps were vital for transporting water from the Nile to farms in the arid, agricultural-based community.

"They stole as much as they could, and whatever they couldn't take, they burned," Demetry said. "There was screaming all over the village. We were screaming and asking God to help us. We have never seen a night like that before."

The rioters were responding to a rumor that a 20-year-old Coptic man, Hussam Naweil Attallah, was romantically involved with an 18-year-old Muslim woman, whose name has not been released. Attallah knew the woman because he and his family lived next door to her.

Someone had allegedly seen the two alone together near a cemetery. Attallah and the woman were detained and then handed over to police. After subjecting the young woman to a medical examination to confirm her virginity, authorities decided the two had not been intimate, and the woman was released. Egypt's State Security Intelligence kept Attallah in its custody, presumably for his protection. He is still in custody.

It is unclear who started a rumor about an illicit relationship, but Samir said there is a feud going on in Al-Nawahid among three families for political control of the area, and two of the families are inciting violence, using Christians in the area as pawns to depose the current mayor.

Local police and area residents seemed to be aware unrest was coming before the riot happened, Samir said. Church officials canceled St. George's Day services in anticipation of violence. Security forces had been posted near the Christian area of Al-Nawahid for a few days, but for unknown reasons they moved away shortly before the destruction started.

When the rampage began at 8 p.m., at the start of Eid al-Adha – the Muslim Feast of the Sacrifice – local police were quickly outnumbered, and military police were called. At 10 p.m. the new security detail surrounded the area of the violent mob but did nothing to stop the attacks.

Security forces prevented firefighters deployed to the scene from entering the area where fires were burning, according to Samir. When fire-fighting teams eventually entered the area, Muslim groups had severed fire mains. The blazes raged for four hours.

Two rioters were detained, according to local media reports. The use of tear gas eventually broke up the mob.

After the rioting was over, Copts whose homes and property had been damaged were rounded up and taken to a police station. They declined to cooperate with the police, citing alleged irregularities in police reports and objections to how officers conducted the investigation into the fires.

Initially police claimed that the fires started suddenly and that area Muslims tried to help put them out. Samir said he thought the claim was dubious at best.

"The fires started at the same time in 23 houses?" he said.

Demetry was less diplomatic. "We saw them," he said. "We saw them, one by one, doing it."

According to Samir, police did not let the victims report the names of the people who attacked their homes or report damages. He also said police did not take any information about men who suffered physical injuries. The group of victims has obtained a lawyer to take both criminal and civil action against the attackers.

"As long as the police fail to make strong charges against these people, these problems will keep going for years," Samir said. "Because they try to hide the truth."

Meantime, victims like Demetry and his family are left to sift through the rubble and try to rebuild their lives. He said his brother is still trying to cope.

"His whole apartment was turned to ashes," Demetry said. "Even the plaster [from the walls] was on the ground. They even tried to break the ceramic floor and take it."

There are many similarities between this month's attack and an attack that happened in November 2009 in the village of Kom al-Ahmar, also in Qena Governorate. For several days, mobs swept through the village burning Christian-owned houses and businesses after a rumor started that a Christian man, Girgis Baroumi Girgis, then 21, raped a Muslim girl, then 12. Samir said people often use rumors in Qena to incite violence against the Christian minority.

"When people want to make a problem, they make up a story that a Christian boy is in love with a Muslim girl or vice versa," Samir said.

Numerous Coptic human rights activists and some journalists in Egypt have called the rape accusation into question. They cite the conflicting accounts from the alleged victim, physical evidence that seems to contradict an accusation of sexual assault and lack of witnesses to a crime that allegedly took place in broad daylight on a major thoroughfare of the village.

Girgis has been in jail without any serious attempt to bring him to trial – another sign, interested parties said, that the evidence against him is weak.

Things are now quiet in Al-Nawahid, but it is an uneasy peace.

"Everyone is still afraid. Even the people in the village next door are afraid," Demetry said, "We can't trust anyone."

Cairo police clash with Christian rioters, 1 dead

Maggie Michael

AP (24.11.2010) / HRWF (25.11.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Hundreds of Christians smashed cars and windows and tried to assault a municipal building in Cairo Wednesday after police violently stopped the construction of a church that left one person dead and underscored Egypt's sectarian tensions.

Police clashed with Christians first at the church construction site in the early hours of the morning and then several hours later when a mob of hundreds assaulted the local governor's office.

The slain Christian was shot in the thigh and died after arriving at a nearby hospital, according to Egypt's official Middle East News Agency. Thirty people were injured in the clashes and 93 were arrested. Two priests were summoned by the general prosecutor for interrogation.

Coptic Christians make up about 10 percent of Egypt's population of 80 million. They complain frequently of discrimination, though they generally live in peace with the Muslim majority with occasional flare-ups of tension and violence, especially over limits on church building.

The government said construction had been ordered halted in this case because the building was not licensed to become a house of worship.

"They had previously been ordered to cease construction due to violations of building safety code standards, and because they were attempting to illegally transform the building into a church for the conduct of religious services," said a statement.

A Coptic priest overseeing the construction in the Omraniya neighborhood of Giza, Cairo's twin city, said that 5,000 security forces cordoned off the site at 3:00 am while workers were working on the roof.

"The security forces started the whole thing," Mina Zarif, the priest of the nearby church of Mar Mena said. "The workers became fed up and started throwing stones."

The government said protesters were blocking a major highway and had to be cleared.

"Repeated police requests to cease the violence were ignored by the demonstrators, at which point security officials had no choice but to control and disperse the gathering through the use of tear gas," the government said.

A few hours later, some 700 Christians, many bearing makeshift crosses, descended on the headquarters of the Giza governor where they were met by riot police armed with tear gas and rubber bullets.

Governor Gen. Sayyed Abdel Aziz told the official news agency that rioters had tried and failed to storm the building.

After the demonstrations had been dispersed, 15 police trucks still surrounded the area around the church and there was heavy security in the neighborhood.

Zarif, one of the construction supervisors, admitted that the four story building was actually licensed as a community center in 2009 rather than a house of worship.

"What is the problem in bypassing an already unjust and flawed law? the church has been doing that all the time, turning service buildings into churches," the priest said, unapologetic.

The Coptic community says authorities in Egypt are reluctant to approve permits to build churches, which they say they need to accommodate growing numbers of worshippers.

One way to evade the rules is to obtain permits for Christian service centers, which they then turn to churches.

Medhat Kalada, head of the Geneva-based United Copts organization, said that the government has a "double-standard" with complicated procedures needed for the construction of the churches in comparison to the relative ease in building mosques.

"The government is discriminating against Christians when it comes to building churches," he said. The government insists Christians enjoy the same rights as Muslims. Human rights groups say attacks on Copts are on the rise, underscoring the government's failure to address chronic sectarian strains in a society where religious radicalism is gaining ground.

Last week, Muslims in southern Egypt set fire to 10 houses belonging to Christians following rumors a Copt had an affair with a Muslim girl.

Last year in Qena, also in the south, a Coptic man was accused of kidnapping and raping a 12-year-old Muslim girl. The alleged assault led to widespread protests by the Muslim community and increased tensions between the two religious groups, which culminated in the murder of six Copts and one Muslim security guard at a church on Jan. 6.

Arrest warrant sought for Egyptian Muslim cleric for 'hate speech'

By Mary Abdelmassih

AINA (10.08.2010) / HRWF (11.08.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Christian Coptic human rights group is seeking to initiate an international arrest warrant in the United Kingdom against the leading Muslim fundamentalist cleric Sheikh Yousef al-Badri for inciting Muslims to kill apostates from Islam in Egypt. Al-Badri, who is a member of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and is associated with the primary Islamic institute of al Azhar University, is reported to have stated "God has commanded us to kill those who leave Islam."

Although Christianity in Egypt is not illegal, it is under a common interpretation of Islamic law that conversion to another religion from Islam is punishable by death. Muslims, mainly fundamentalists, see no difference between apostasy and subversion; they fear that allowing conversion will ultimately undermine Islam.

"We expected the Egyptian Prosecutor General to take legal action against al-Badri, but unfortunately in Egypt impunity for Muslims prevails at all levels when it comes to the rights of Christians," said Dr. Ibrahim Habib, President of United Copts of Great Britain who will initiate the arrest warrant. "Incitement to kill is a crime under legal and ethical norms."

Sheikh Yousef al-Badri has called on several occasions for the "spilling of the blood" of Muslims who convert to Christianity, causing them to live in hiding under the constant threat of vigilantism and death from fundamentalists. "Even if we are killed, the government will not convict our killers," said Mohamad Hegazy, a renown apostate from Islam, whose face is familiar all over Egypt.

In 2007, Mohamad Hegazy, a Muslim who converted to Christianity in 1998, was the first convert to sue the Egyptian government for rejecting his application to change his official documents to reflect his new Christian faith (AINA 2-27-2010).

This case sparked national uproar in Egypt, with al-Badri making a number of controversial statements, besides filing charges of inciting sectarian strife against Hegazy's first lawyer, Mamdouh Nakhla, who had to withdraw from the case after receiving several death threats.

On August 25, 2007, Hegazy, who took the Christian name of Beshoy Boulos, was interviewed on Egyptian television together with Sheikh al-Badri, who openly called for Hegazy to receive the death penalty for leaving Islam because his new commitment to Christianity meant he had declared war on Islam, according the arrest warrant for --al-Badri. The legal basis of the arrest warrant is that Sheikh al-Badri has engaged in "hate speech" which threatens converts to Christianity in Egypt with death, in a society where individuals will act on these incitements, as well as denying the fundamental right to change religion from Islam to Christianity which is protected by international law. Also "hate speech" causes individuals subject to this vitriol to sustain severe mental suffering which comes under the crime of 'torture' as defined by the Criminal Justice Act 1988,

rising to a breach of international law. The United Kingdom is, therefore, under obligation to bring violators of the International Covenant to justice.

The arrest warrant states that al-Badri has also been engaged in a number of other provocative acts, such as calling for 'Muslims to declare Jihad' against America, preaching against Abu Ziad who had to claim asylum in Europe, supporting suicide bombings and endorsing wife beatings.

Hegazy is married to Katarina, a convert from Islam before meeting him, and has a 2-year old daughter named Mariam. He said he filed the lawsuit to set a precedent for other converts, and because he wants his child to be openly raised as a Christian.

In February 2008 Hegazy lost his case, with the court ruling that according to Sharia Law, a Muslim who converted to Christianity cannot legally change his religious status. The reasoning given behind this ruling was that 'Islam is the final and most complete religion' and since "monotheistic religions were sent by God in chronological order," one cannot therefore convert to "an older religion."

Hegazy believes that even after the media stopped reporting on his case, he still remains a target -- as all converts do -- of Islamic militants. According to Compass Direct News, He was forced into hiding after extremists, unaware of his escape, surrounded his former house for several days and set fire to his neighbor's residence, killing the female occupant.

The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ), an affiliate of the American Center for Law and Justice, submitted an application in January 2010, to the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights "seeking judgment against the Egyptian government for refusing to recognize the fact that Mr. Mohammed Bishoy Hegazy and his family members are Christians converted from Islam".

Another victim of "hate speech" is Muslim-born Maher el-Gowhary who publicly converted to Christianity in 2008, after secretly being a Christian for over 35 years (AINA 9-26-2009). In August 2008, he filed the second lawsuit of a Muslim-born against the Egyptian Government to seek official recognition of his conversion. He lost the case on June 13, 2009. According to the Court ruling, the religious conversion of a Muslim is against Islamic law and poses a threat to the "Public Order" in Egypt.

The Fatwa (religious edict) issued by Sheikh Yousef al-Badri calling for the "shedding of his blood" caused Maher and his teenage daughter Dina, who also converted to Christianity, to live in hiding and be constantly on the run, fearing danger from reactionaries and advocates of the enforcement of Islamic apostasy death laws.

"We live in constant fear ever since radical sheikhs have called for my blood to be shed because I left Islam. We are mostly afraid of the uneducated people on the street," Maher said in an interview aired end July 2010 on ZDF German TV.

Maher escaped many attacks on his life, the last taking place on Sunday, July 5, 2010, when a Muslim fundamentalist tried to behead him in broad daylight. His daughter Dina also escaped an acid attack (AINA 4-17-2010).

Commenting on the reason for the arrest warrant initiated by his group, Dr. Ibrahim Habib said that the Egyptian government must respect freedom of religion as a fundamental right. "Besides, criminals have to know that they are not immune from the legal systems in the West."

Cairo court rules on Egyptians married to Israeli women

BBC (05.06.2010) / HRWF (15.06.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A court in Cairo has upheld a ruling urging the government to consider stripping Egyptian men who are married to Israeli women of their citizenship.

The ruling requires officials to send all such cases to the cabinet, to be decided on an individual basis.

The interior ministry had appealed against the original ruling, made by a lower court last year.

The new decision is seen as a sign of negative feeling towards Israel in Egypt, despite a 1979 peace treaty.

Anti-Israeli sentiment is high in the country in the aftermath of Israeli raids on Gaza aid ships - but the long-scheduled court decision was not connected.

It calls on the cabinet to determine whether to remove the nationality of the men concerned, as well as that of their children.

The court said the government should consider whether the Israeli woman was an Arab or a Jew.

It is estimated that about 30,000 Egyptians are married to Israeli women.

'Disloyal'

The lawyer who brought the case, Nabih el-Wahsh, said it was aimed at protecting Egyptian youth and Egypt's national security.

He says that offspring of marriages between Egyptian men and Israeli women should not be allowed to perform military service.

There should not be a new generation "disloyal to Egypt and the Arab world", he said.

The appeal was sent by the government after a verdict last year stated the 1976 article of citizenship law should be implemented.

That law requires the stripping of citizenship of those who married Israelis who have served in the army or embraced Zionism.

Negad al-Borai, an Egyptian lawyer and a human rights activist, said he was "surprised" by the verdict and that the government was sending out mixed messages about Israel.

"The president congratulates Israel's president in national holidays yet it punishes the people for having relationships with Israel," he told Reuters news agency.

"Egyptian law says citizenship can only be revoked if the citizen is proven to be spying on his country, and this verdict considers marrying an Israeli an act of spying".

Egyptian convert endures life at a standstill – on the run

Daughter unable to attend school, church; acid thrown on her jacket

By Wayne King

Compass Direct (25.05.2010) / HRWF (31.05.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - From the mosque across the street, words blasting from minaret megaphones reverberate throughout the tiny apartment where Maher Ahmad El-Mo'otahssem Bellah El-Gohary is forced to hide. Immediately following afternoon prayers, the Friday sermon is, in part, on how to deal with Christians.

"Do not shake their hands. Do not go into their homes. Do not eat their food," an imam shouts as El-Gohary, a convert to Christianity from Islam, looks through his window toward the mosque, shakes his head and grimaces.

"I hope one day to live in a place where there are no mosques," he says. "How many megaphones do they need?"

For nearly two years, El-Gohary and his teenage daughter have been living in hiding because he abandoned Islam and embraced Christianity. During this time he has been beaten and forcibly detained, and his daughter has been attacked. He has had to endure death threats, poverty and crushing boredom.

Asked what gets him through the constant pressure of living on the run, El-Gohary said he wants to show the world how Christians are treated in Egypt.

"My main driving force is I want to prove to people the amount of persecution that Muslim converts and Christians face here, and that the persecution has been going on for 1,400 years," he said.

When asked the same question, his 16-year-old daughter, Dina Maher Ahmad Mo'otahssem, pushed back tears and said one word.

"God."

Hiding

El-Gohary, 57, and his daughter were forced into hiding shortly after August 2008, when he sued the national government to allow him to change the religion listed on his state-issued ID from Islam to Christianity.

El-Gohary followed in the footsteps of Mohammed Ahmed Hegazy, 27, also a convert from Islam, in filing an ID case because he didn't want his daughter to be forced to take Islamic education classes or have her declared an "apostate" by Egyptian Islamic authorities if she decided to stay a Christian into adulthood. Dina is required by law to possess an ID card. The ID card is used for everything from opening a bank account to receiving medical care. The identification also determines whether Egyptians are subject to Islamic civil courts.

Dina is the daughter of El-Gohary and his first wife, who is a Muslim. El-Gohary said that before he got married, he told his future wife that one day he would be baptized as a Christian. He said he now thinks she was convinced that he would eventually turn back to Islam. Over time, she grew tired of his refusal to go back on his faith and complained to El-Gohary's family, demanding a divorce.

"She started crying. She went to my parents and my brother and said, 'This is not going to work out, I thought that he was going to change his mind. I didn't think he was that serious about it,'" El-Gohary said. "She started talking about it to other people to the point where they started calling me from the loudspeakers of the local mosque, asking me what I was doing and ordering me to come back and pray."

Eventually El-Gohary married another Muslim, and over the years she became a Christian. She has fled Egypt and lives in the United States; El-Gohary hasn't seen her since March 2009.

On April 11, 2009, El-Gohary's lawyers presented a conversion certificate from the Coptic Church in court. He obtained the certificate under court directions after going to Cyprus, at great expense, to obtain a baptismal certificate. The next month, the State Council, a consultative body of Egypt's Administrative Court, provided the court with a report stating that El-Gohary's change of faith violated Islamic law. They instructed that he should be subject to the death penalty.

In February 2009, lawyers opposing El-Gohary's case advocated that he be sentenced to death for apostasy. On June 13, 2009, a Cairo judge rejected El-Gohary's suit.

On Sept. 17, 2009, authorities at Cairo International Airport seized his passport. He was trying to travel to China with the eventual hope of going to the United States. On March 9, 2010, the Egyptian State Council Court in Giza, an administrative court, refused to return his passport. He has another hearing about the passport on June 29.

"I think it's a kind of punishment, to set an example to other Muslims who want to convert," El-Gohary said. "They want me to stay here and suffer to show other converts to be afraid. They are also afraid that if they let me go, then I will get out and start talking about what is happening in Egypt about the persecution and the injustice. We are trapped in our own country without even the rights that animals have."

Conditions

As recently as last week, El-Gohary and his daughter were living in a small, two-bedroom apartment across the street from a mosque on the outskirts of an undisclosed city in Egypt. The floor was littered with grime and bits of trash. Clumps of dust and used water bottles were everywhere.

El-Gohary had taped over the locks, as well as taped shut the inside of windows and doors, to guard against eavesdroppers and intruders. He had taped over all the drain holes of the sinks to keep anyone from pumping in natural gas at night.

Even the shower drain was taped over.

The yellow walls were faded, scuffed and barren, save for a single picture, a holographic portrait of Jesus, taped up in what qualified as a living room. El-Gohary motioned through a door to a porch outside. Rocks and pebbles thrown by area residents who recently learned that he lived there covered the porch.

"I would open the window, but I don't want the rocks to start coming in," he said.

El-Gohary has an old television set and a laptop with limited access to the Internet. Dina said she spends her time reading the Bible, talking to her father or drawing the occasional dress in preparation for obtaining her dream job, designing clothes.

Even the simple task of leaving El-Gohary's apartment is fraught with risk. Every time he leaves, he places a padlock on the door, wraps it with a small plastic bag and melts the bag to the lock with a match.

El-Gohary cannot work and has to rely on the kindness of other Christians. People bring him food and water and the occasional donation. When the food runs out, he has to brave going outside.

"Our life is extremely, extremely hard. It's hard for us to attend a church more than once because people will know it is us," he said. "We can't go to a supermarket more than once because we are going to be killed."

Girl, Interrupted

Possibly the worst part for El-Gohary is watching his daughter suffer. A reflective youth with a gentle demeanor, Dina is quick to smile. But at a time when her life should be filled with friends, freedom and self-discovery, she is instead confined between four walls.

Even going to school, normally a simple thing, is fraught with dangerous possibilities. Dina hasn't gone to school in about a year. She said that the last time she did, other students ridiculed her mercilessly, and a teacher hit her when she tried to attend religious classes for Christians instead of Muslims.

Now she and her father fear she could be beaten, kidnapped and forcibly converted, or simply killed. She can't even go to church, she said.

"I don't understand why I am being treated this way," she said. "I believe in something, Christianity – I chose the religion because I love it. So why should I be treated this way?"

Dina was a little girl when she starting hearing about Jesus. Her father used to sit with her and tell her stories from the Bible, and he also told her about his conversion experience. Like her father, she cites a supernatural experience as a defining event in her faith.

One night, she said, she had a dream in which an enormous image of Jesus smiling appeared in a garden. She said the image became bigger and bigger until it touched the ground and became a golden church. She told her father about the dream, and since then she has believed in Christ.

Under Islamic law, Dina is considered a Muslim because her father was born as one. Because, like her father, Dina has decided to follow Christ, she is considered an "apostate" under most interpretations of Islamic law.

She gained national prominence in November 2009, when she wrote a letter, through a Coptic website, to U.S. President Barack Obama. She told the president that Muslims in the United States are treated much better than Copts in Egypt and asked why this was the case. She hopes the president will pressure the Egyptian government to ensure religious rights or let her and her father immigrate to the United States.

One afternoon last month, Dina was walking to a market with her father. As the two walked, El-Gohary noticed smoke and vapors coming off Dina's jacket. The canvas was sizzling and dissolving. Someone had poured acid over the jacket. El-Gohary ripped it off her and threw it away.

"I asked people if they saw what happened and everyone said, 'No, we didn't see anything,'" El-Gohary said.

Luckily, Dina was not physically injured in the attack, but since then she has been terrified to go outside.

"I am very, very scared," she said. "I haven't gone outside since the attack happened."

Change of Faith

El-Gohary, also known as Peter Athanasius, became a Christian 36 years ago while attending an academy for police trainees. During his second year of school, he became good friends with his roommate, a Copt and the only Christian in the academy. After watching cadets harass his roommate for praying, El-Gohary asked him why the others had ridiculed him.

"For me, it was the first time I had heard something like that," El-Gohary said. "I didn't have any Christian friends before, and I didn't know about the level of persecution that takes place against Christians."

Eventually, El-Gohary asked his friend for a Bible and took it home. His family tried to dissuade him from reading it.

"No, you can't read the Bible," his father told him. "It's a really bad book."

Undeterred, El-Gohary began reading the Bible in the privacy of his room. In the beginning, he said, the Bible was difficult to understand. But El-Gohary concentrated his efforts on the New Testament, and for the first time in his life, he said, he felt like God was speaking to him.

El-Gohary read the account of Jesus meeting the woman caught committing adultery, and the level of mercy that Jesus showed her transformed him, he said.

"Jesus said, 'If anyone among you is without sin, then let him throw the first stone.' The amount of forgiveness and love in this story really opened my eyes to the nature of Christianity," El-Gohary said. "The main law that Jesus talked about was loving God 'with all your heart, soul and mind.' The basis of Christianity is love and forgiveness, unlike Islam, where it is based on revenge, fighting and war."

Also, El-Gohary said, when he compared the two religions' versions of heaven, he found that the Islamic version was about physical pleasure, whereas for Christians it was about being released from the physical world to be with God.

El-Gohary said his decision to follow Christ was final after he had a brilliant vision of light in his bedroom at his parents' home, accompanied by the presence of "the peace of God." El-Gohary said at first he thought he was seeing things, but then his father knocked on the door and demanded to know why the light was on. He told his father he was looking for something.

Persecution Begins

As a budding Christian convert, El-Gohary went back to the police academy and learned as much as he could about Christ and the Bible from his roommate. Persecution wasn't long in coming.

One day an upperclassman spotted El-Gohary absent-mindedly drawing a cross on a notebook. The cadet sent El-Gohary to a superior for questioning.

El-Gohary avoided telling academy officials that his roommate had taught him about Christianity, but a captain at the school was able to piece together the evidence. The captain called El-Gohary's father, a high-ranking officer at the academy, who in turn told the captain to make the young convert's life "hell."

Officials were imaginative in their attempts to break El-Gohary. He had to wake up before all the other students. He was ordered to carry his mattress around buildings and up and

down flights of stairs. They exercised El-Gohary until he was about to pass out. Then they forced him to clean bathroom facilities with a toothbrush.

El-Gohary was not swayed from Christ, but he decided he couldn't stay in what he said is the agency that "is the center of persecution against Christians" in Egypt. He tried numerous times to resign, but officials wouldn't let him. Then he tried to get kicked out. Eventually, officials suspended the police cadet and sent him home for two weeks. At home, his family had a surprise waiting; they had hired an Islamic scholar to bring him back to Islam.

The scholar started by yelling Islamic teachings into El-Gohary's ears, then moved on to write Quranic verses on his arms. El-Gohary remained seated and bore the humiliation in silence. Suddenly El-Gohary stood up, pinned the man against a wall and started yelling at him; the convert had caught the distinct smell of burning flesh – when he looked down at his arms, El-Gohary saw the scholar burning his hands with thin, smoldering iron rods.

"I said, 'Enough! I have tolerated all of your talk. I have listened to all you have said, but this has gone too far,'" El-Gohary recalled. "The man said I had a 'Christian demon' inside me."

Hope

As bad as things have been for El-Gohary and his daughter, their dedication seems rock-solid. They said they have never regretted their decisions to become Christians.

El-Gohary said that eventually, he will triumph.

"By law, my circumstance will have to change," he said. "I have done nothing illegal."

Dina is not so sure; she said she doesn't feel like she has a future in Egypt, and she hopes to move to a place where she can get an education.

Whatever happens, both El-Gohary and his daughter said they are prepared to live in hiding indefinitely.

"There are days that I break down and cry, but I am not giving up," Dina said. "I am still not going back to Islam."

Sheikh Incites Muslims to Attack Christians in Egypt

Assault on community center, church, homes leaves 24 Copts wounded

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct (17.03.2010) / HRWF (18.03.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A mob of enraged Muslims attacked a Coptic Christian community in a coastal town in northern Egypt last weekend, wreaking havoc for hours and injuring 24 Copts before security forces contained them.

The violence erupted on Friday (March 12) afternoon after the sheikh of a neighborhood mosque incited Muslims over a loudspeaker, proclaiming jihad against Christians in Marsa Matrouh, in Reefiya district, 320 kilometers (200 miles) west of Alexandria, according to reports.

The angry crowd hurled rocks at the district church, Christians and their properties, looted homes and set fires that evening. The mob was reportedly infuriated over the building of a wall around newly-bought land adjacent to the Reefiya Church building. The building, called al Malak al Khairy, translated Angel's Charity, also houses a clinic and community center.

"I was very surprised by the degree of hatred that people had toward Christians," said a reporter for online Coptic news source Theban Legion, who visited Reefiya after the attack. "The hate and the disgust were obvious."

The attack was a rarity for a northern coastal resort town in Egypt; most tensions between Copts and Muslims erupt in southern towns of the country.

According to a worker building the wall around the newly-bought plot, local Sheikh Khamis along with a dozen "bearded" men accused the church and workers of blocking a road early on Friday, staff members of Watani newspaper said.

Worried that the dispute could erupt into violence, one of the priests ordered the workers to take the wall down.

The governor of Marsa Matrouh approved the building of the church center and granted a security permit to conduct religious services in 2009.

Following afternoon mosque prayers, Sheikh Khamis rallied neighborhood Muslims, gathering more than 300 people. The mob broke into groups, attacking the church and nearby houses of the Coptic Christian community. There are nearly 2,000 Coptic Christians in Reefiya.

Around 400 Copts fled into the church building while the rioting mob looted and destroyed 17 houses, 12 cars and two motorcycles, according to Watani.

Local security forces were unable to contain the attack and called-in back up from nearby Alexandria. At nearly 1:30 a.m. on Sunday (March 14) they managed to contain the crowd and let the Christians out of the church.

Police arrested 16 young Christian men among those who were inside the church building, according to Watani. Later, four of them who were released because they were underage told reporters that security forces beat them. Police also arrested 18 of the assailants.

Some of the attackers and security forces were also wounded in the altercation. Of the wounded Copts, two were reportedly rushed to a hospital in Alexandria in critical condition. Sobhy Girgis, 33, was taken to Alexandria's Victoria Hospital for internal bleeding in the kidney from injuries sustained from rocks the crowd threw at him, and Mounir Naguib, 41, was treated for multiple stab wounds, according to Watani.

Naguib, a teacher, said he was accosted while on his way to the Angel's Charity building, with a knife-wielding member of the mob asking him if he was a Christian. When he said he was, the Muslim told him to convert to Islam by pronouncing the two testimonies of the Muslim faith (that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is his messenger).

"When I refused, he stabbed me in the thigh and hit me on the head," Naguib told Watani.

One Copt, Nabil Wahba, told of how his house was destroyed. Wahba said he came home at 6 p.m. to find around 40 men hurling stones at his house. At 9 p.m. they came back with clubs and iron pipes, ripping the windows open and throwing fireballs into the house.

"When we tried to put out the fire, they hurled stones at us, while others were pulling down the garden fence and setting the other side of the house aflame," Wahba told Watani.

Security forces pulled Wahba and his sister out of his blazing house.

On the same day that violence erupted in Marsa Matrouh, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) released a report denouncing Egypt's legal system for not bringing people to justice for violent acts against Christians and their property.

According to the report, in the last year there have been more than a dozen incidents in which Coptic Christians have been targets of violence.

"This upsurge in violence and the failure to prosecute those responsible fosters a growing climate of impunity," USCIRF Chairman Leonard Leo states in the report.

Since 2002, Egypt has been on the USCIRF "Watch List" as a country with serious religious freedom violations, including widespread problems of discrimination, intolerance and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities, according to the report.

Commenting on the Marsa Matrouh attack, the Theban Legion reporter stated that among the mob were members of Bedouin communities who are intolerant of plurality and diversity in society.

"The law of the land is supposed to be a civil law, and we would like to see a civil law applying to everybody," he said.

Egyptian court refuses to return passport to Christian

Convert from Islam tried to leave country to save his life

By Will Morris

Compass Direct (15.03.2010) / HRWF (16.03.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - An Egyptian court last week refused to return the passport of a convert from Islam who tried to leave Egypt to save his life, the Christian said on Friday (March 12).

On Tuesday (March 9) the Egyptian State Council Court in Giza, an administrative court, refused to return the passport of Maher Ahmad El-Mo'otahssem Bellah El-Gohary. El-Gohary said he was devastated by the decision, which essentially guarantees him several more months of living in fear.

"I am very, very disappointed and very unhappy about what happened," he said, "because I am being threatened – my life is being threatened, my daughter's life is being threatened very frequently, and I don't feel safe at all in Egypt."

Nabil Ghobreyal, El-Gohary's attorney, told Compass the government declined to give the court any reason for its actions.

"There was no response as to why his passport was taken," Ghobreyal said.

On Sept. 17, 2009, authorities at Cairo International Airport seized El-Gohary's passport. El-Gohary, 57, also known as Peter Athanasius, was trying to leave the country to visit China. Eventually he intended to travel to the United States. At the time, El-Gohary was told only that his travel had been barred by "higher authority."

El-Gohary, who converted to Christianity from Islam more than 30 years ago, gained notoriety in Egypt in February 2009, when he filed a court application to have the religion on his identification card changed from Muslim to Christian. El-Gohary's action caused widespread uproar among conservative Muslims in Egypt. He was branded an "apostate" and multiple fatwas, or religious edicts were issued against him. In accordance with some interpretations of the Quran, some Muslims believe El-Gohary should be killed for leaving Islam.

Since filing his application, El-Gohary has lived in fear and has been in hiding with his 15-year-old daughter. Every month, he said, they move from apartment to apartment. He is unable to work, and his daughter, also a Christian, is unable to attend school.

Their days are filled with anxiety, fear and boredom.

"We are very fearful," El-Gohary said. "We are hiding between four walls all day long."

El-Gohary went through extraordinary efforts to get the documentation the court demanded for him to officially change his religion, including getting a certificate of conversion from a Coptic Christian religious group. The certificate, which was the first time a Christian church in Egypt recognized a convert from Islam, also caused an uproar.

But ultimately, in June the court denied his application. He was the second person in Egypt to apply to have his religion officially changed from Islam to Christianity. The other applicant was denied as well. El-Gohary has not exhausted his appeals and may file legal proceedings with an international legal body. He has another hearing with the administrative court on June 29.

"I don't understand what I have done wrong," El-Gohary said. "I went through the normal legal channels. I thought I was an Egyptian citizen and I would be treated as such by the Egyptian law. I went through the front doors of the legal system, not the back doors, and for that I am being threatened, chased, and I live in continuous fear."

The National Constitution of Egypt guarantees freedom of religion unless it contradicts set practices in sharia, or Islamic law. While it is easy to change one's religious identity from Christian to Muslim, it is impossible to do the opposite.

El-Gohary's case was mentioned by name in a human rights report issued Thursday (March 11) by the U.S. Department of State. El-Gohary said he was pleased that his case was in the report. He said he believes it is his duty to open new doors for his fellow converts in Egypt.

"This is something I have to do," he said. "It is a duty. I have become a symbol for Christians in Egypt."

El-Gohary said he hopes U.S. President Barack Obama, other world leaders and international groups will pressure the Egyptian government to allow him to leave the country.

In spite of his ordeal, El-Gohary said faith is still strong and that he doesn't regret becoming a Christian.

"I don't regret it at all," he continued, excitedly. "This is the narrow road that Christians have to go through and suffer to reach eternal life. I have no regrets whatsoever. We are very grateful to know Christ, and we know He's the way."

Another Copt killed as alleged shooters plead not guilty in Egypt

Coptic carpenter killed outside building that Muslims feared would be used as church

By Will Morris

Compass Direct (16.02.2010) / HRWF (17.02.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Three men accused of killing six Coptic worshippers and a security guard pleaded not guilty on Saturday (Feb. 13) as the Coptic community mourned the loss of yet another victim of apparent anti-Christian violence.

The three men allegedly sprayed a crowd with gunfire after a Christmas service in Nag Hammadi on Jan. 6. In addition to the seven that were killed, nine others were wounded. The killings were the worst act of anti-Coptic violence since January 2000, when 20 Copts were killed in sectarian fighting in Al-Kosheh.

Defendants Mohammed al-Kammuni, Qorshi Abul Haggag and Hendawi Sayyed appeared Saturday in an emergency security court in Qena, a city 39 miles (63 kilometers) north of Luxor.

In front of the packed courtroom, the three men said little at the hearing other than to enter their plea before Judge Mohammed Adul Magd, according to one attorney present at the hearing. The men are charged with premeditated murder, public endangerment and damaging property.

Numerous Muslim attorneys volunteered to defend them for free as seven attorneys representing the interests of the victims looked on. The next hearing is set for March 20.

Even as the men entered their pleas, the Coptic community mourned the loss of yet another Christian, this one shot dead by police. On the evening of Feb. 9, Malak Saad, a 25-year-old Coptic carpenter living in Teta in Menoufia Province, was walking outside a meeting hall that police had seized from Christians when he was shot through his chest at close range. He died instantly.

Scant details are known about the shooting. Police surrounded the entire village and closed it to all reporters. In a statement, officials at the Interior Ministry said the Saad was killed by mistake when a bullet discharged while a police guard was cleaning his weapon. The Interior Ministry said the shooter has been detained and will be tried in a military court. Such courts are traditionally closed to the public.

One of Saad's cousins, who requested anonymity, disputed the Interior Ministry's version of the incident. He said that the guard had used the bathroom inside the meeting hall and had come outside of the building when he exchanged a few words with Saad and shot him at close range. The bullet went completely through Saad's chest.

The building in question had been Coptic-owned for 16 years, but two days prior to the shooting, police seized it after a group of Muslims started a rumor that the owners planned to convert the hall into a church building.

Disputes over worship venues are common in Egypt. Copts and other Christians are extremely restricted in opening or even maintaining houses of worship because of complex government statutes. Anti-Christian elements within Egyptian society often use the statutes to harass Christians, Christian leaders said.

Christians arrested

Following the Jan. 6 shootings, in a move that Christian leaders said was designed to silence the Coptic community's protests, police began going door to door and arresting Coptic men in their late teens and 20s. Reports vary widely on the numbers of how many men were arrested, but 15 arrests have been confirmed.

Early in the morning of Jan. 8, officers from State Security Intelligence appeared at the home of Tanios Samuel looking for a different house. When officers realized they were at the wrong home, they arrested his brothers, Fady Milad Samuel, 21, and Wael Milad Samuel, 24.

"We are Copts. It is their country, they will do whatever they want," Tanios Samuel said about the arrests.

He said the government is using his brothers and the others arrested as pawns to silence dissent. He said he lives in fear for himself and his brothers.

"The families are very scared – scared of violence, getting threats all the time," Samuel said. "All we want is peace."

Last month's attack brought widespread outrage across the Coptic community and from human rights groups around the world.

Since his rise to power in 1981, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has avoided classifying any anti-Coptic attack as part of a larger sectarian struggle within the country. His critics however, have long said his policies or lack thereof contribute greatly to the anti-Christian climate within the country.

Although freedom of religion is guaranteed in Egypt's constitution, Islam is the official state religion. In public schools, the Quran is used to teach Arabic.

On Jan. 21, Mubarak made an uncharacteristically strong statement about the shootings to MENA, the government-run news agency.

"The criminal act in Nag Hammadi has bled the hearts of Egyptians," he said. "I hasten to affirm that the reasonable people of this nation, and its religious leaders and thinkers ... bear the greater responsibility to contain discord and ignorance and blind fanaticism and to confront the despicable sectarian strife that threatens the unity of our society."

Despite Mubarak's comments, the government has characterized the attack as either a random criminal act or as one done in reaction to a November incident in which a 21-year-old Christian man allegedly raped a 12-year-old Muslim girl.

In an interview with BBC Arabic, Dr. Fathi Sourour, head of the Egyptian Parliament, said, "The Nag Hammadi shooting of Christians on Christmas Eve was a single criminal act, with no sectarian dimensions." He added that the crime was "prompted by the 'death' of a Muslim girl as a result of being raped by a Copt."

Later, commenting on a report about the incident, he described the shootings as "a clash between two brothers living in one home."

Copts, however, have a starkly different impression of the shooting.

Georgette Qillini, a Coptic member of the Egyptian Parliament, described the attack as "a purely sectarian crime and by no means an individual criminal attack," the Egyptian newspaper Al-Ahram reported.

Ibtessam Habib, another Coptic Parliament member, agreed that "sectarian rather than personal motives lie behind the Nag Hammadi attack."

Twenty activists arrested in Egypt

Jubilee Campaign (15.01.2010) / HRWF (19.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - According to news outlet Bikya Masr and reports from Egyptian activists, in the morning of January 15, at least twenty activists were arrested in Egypt when they exited a train in Nagaa Hammadi. Activists were traveling to this village in an attempt to show solidarity to the victims of sectarian violence that occurred on January 6 during a Coptic Christmas Eve service resulting in the death of seven Christian Copts. The organizers efforts were not political, but instead were meant to show that Egyptians of diverse backgrounds could unite to support fellow citizens in the midst of growing sectarian conflict.

Upon their arrest, they were taken to local state security offices and were later transferred to the city of Qena in separate cars. There are reports that security forces confiscated their identification cards and phones as well as inflicted physical and verbal abuse. Of those arrested, many are well-known citizen journalists and bloggers, including Esraa Abdelfattah, Wael Abbas, Bassem Fathy, and Ismail Askandarani as well as Bassem Samir and Ahmed Badawy who are also members of El Ghad party. Also arrested was French activist, Nadia Zena'ie, who has been denied contact with the French Embassy. In an effort to gain the release of those arrested, Egyptian activists are leading a sit-in at the Journalists Syndicate in Cairo. Please show your support for those arrested by contacting the Egyptian government, Egyptian missions and embassies, demanding their release.

For more information from Bikya Masr, go to: <http://bikyamasr.com/?p=7605>.

For more information, go to:

<http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/news/bloggers-arrested-en-route-naga-hammadi>.

For more information, go to:

<http://www.demdigest.net/blog/democracy-promotion/egypt-police-bar-activists-from-site-of-sectarian-attack.html>.

To read the full list of those arrested, go to:

<http://globalvoicesonline.org/2010/01/15/egypt-bloggers-arrested-over-naga-hammady-massacre/>.

For information in Arabic, go to: <http://www.trella.org/c/?p=533>.

Over 100 Coptic Christian teenagers arrested in Egypt

By Mary Abdelmassih

AINA (13.01.2010) / HRWF (15.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Egyptian State Security has intensified its intimidation of the Coptic Church and Christians in Nag Hammadi, and neighboring Bahgoura, by carrying out random arrests of Christian youth. The campaign against Christians started on Friday January 7, 2010 and is continuing; multiple members of families have been arrested

without warrants. Most arrests are being carried at dawn. More than one hundred Christian youth have been arrested without charge.

Arrests of Copts after every sedition is the usual scenario as a pressure card in the hands of State Security to force the church and Copts to accept "reconciliation", in which Coptic victims give up all criminal and civil charges against the perpetrators. Because of the reaction in Egypt and worldwide to the shootings and the role of the State Security, Bishop Kyrillos was asked issue statements downplaying the negligence of State Security. It is believed the arrests of the Coptic youth is a pressure tactic to force him to recant his accusations.

Anwar Samuel, a head teacher from Nag Hammadi, told Freecoats that State Security came to their home at four o'clock in the morning, looking for his nephew Mohareb, who happened to be in Kuwait. "Instead they arrested my three other nephews, Fadi, Tanios and Wael Milad Samuel, and took them away in their pajamas." He said they have been subjected to electric shocks.

Coptic News Bulletin contacted several families who confirmed that males as young as 16 were taken away by the police. In an aired interviews, affected families told how the Police tricked their sons into going with them, by telling them that Bishop Kyrillos wanted them to do so for their safety.

Habib Tanios was arrested on charges of firing on people who burnt his home in Bahgoura, although he has no rifle.

Families of the arrested Copts congregated all day near police station waiting for news.

According to sources close to Freecoats, strict state security instructions were issued to the clergy in the parish of Nag Hamadi, to suppress any move by the Copts affected by the events and the families of those killed, to demonstrate or protest, accompanied by explicit threats that police will be using live ammunition.

After the Nag Hammadi shooting on January 6, in which 8 Copts were killed and 15 injured as they came out of Coptic Christmas Eve mass (AINA [1-7-2010](#), [1-10-2010](#)). Bishop Kyrillos of Nag Hammadi Diocese criticized the lack of police protection of the church, which is usual during such events. He held State Security responsible especially that he had received death threats, and was the intended target of the shootings.

Conflict between State Security and Bishop Kyrillos arose due to his insistence on compensation for the Copts of Farshout who lost property and businesses caused by Muslim mob violence against them end November 2009 (AINA [11-22-2009](#), [11-23-2009](#), [11-29-2009](#)). None of the state officials attended the celebrations at Church which many took as a sign of their knowledge of the forthcoming shootings.

Egypt arrests 42 Muslims, Christians following sectarian riots

Voice of America (10.01.2010) / HRWF (12.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Egyptian authorities have arrested 42 people in connection with sectarian riots by Muslims and Christians in southern Egypt.

Egypt's state-run MENA news agency quotes the police chief of Qena province as saying his forces have detained 28 Coptic Christians and 14 Muslims since Friday's unrest.

MENA says arsonists burned down 11 shops and eight houses owned by members of the minority Christian sect Friday in the village of Bahjora. Christians accuse Muslim rioters of setting the fires.

A day earlier, Christian residents of a nearby town took to the streets to protest against a shooting attack by suspected Muslim gunmen that killed six Christian worshippers and a Muslim policeman. Egyptian police used tear gas to disperse the Christian rioters.

Several gunmen in a moving vehicle shot and killed the six worshippers Wednesday as they left a Christmas Eve mass observed Wednesday in accordance with the Coptic calendar.

Egyptian police Friday detained three Muslim men suspected of involvement in the drive-by shooting. The three have prior criminal records.

Officials say the attack was in apparent retaliation for an alleged rape of a Muslim girl by a Coptic man in a nearby village last November. Muslim residents of Nag Hamadi burned and looted Christian properties for several days in November following reports of the alleged rape.

Coptic Christians are adherents of an Egyptian sect of Christianity that observes Christmas Day on January 7. Christians account for about 10 percent of Egypt's population, the majority of which is Muslim.

Sectarian violence between Muslims and Christians occasionally erupts in southern Egypt due to family and land disputes.
