

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 11, 2009

WASHINGTON, D.C. – USCIRF sent the following letter to President Obama regarding his upcoming meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

August 10, 2009

The President
The White House
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent federal agency, I am writing to urge you to raise the following concerns about religious freedom and related human rights during your upcoming meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. USCIRF was gratified to learn that among the issues to be discussed with President Mubarak will be combating extremism, an area of emphasis for USCIRF during the coming year. While a number of details about our concerns follow, I would like to highlight three of the most serious issues that deserve immediate attention:

- There has been an upsurge of violent attacks in recent months by militant groups on Coptic Orthodox Christians. In your June speech to the Muslim world, you asserted that “the richness of religious diversity must be upheld” when referring to the Copts in Egypt, the largest non-Muslim religious minority in the region. President Mubarak can do more to uphold this diversity by urging his government to more actively investigate religious-based violence against Egyptian citizens, particularly Christians, prosecute perpetrators responsible for the violence, and ensure compensation for victims;

- The Egyptian government has not eliminated bureaucratic hurdles to permit members of the Baha’i faith to obtain official identity documents or to allow identity documents to reflect an individual’s change of religion. In a March 2009 decision, the Supreme Administrative Court paved the way for Baha’is to obtain government-mandated identity cards. The following month, the Egyptian Ministry of Interior published a decree permitting individuals to obtain government documents without identifying themselves as belonging to any particular religion. However, the decision and the decree have not been fully implemented. Regarding changing religious identity status, a Cairo court in June rejected an Egyptian convert’s attempt to change his identity status from Muslim to Christian, the second failed attempt in recent years to exercise constitutionally guaranteed rights by a Muslim-born convert to Christianity. President Mubarak

should be urged to protect the right of individuals by allowing religious affiliation to be omitted or by permitting the appropriate change of religion to be reflected on these documents; and

- Internationally, Egypt's leadership at the United Nations in promoting the flawed "defamation of religions" concept seeks to limit the freedoms of religion and expression by attempting to export blasphemy laws to the international level. We urge you to encourage President Mubarak to drop these initiatives that distort UN human rights bodies with claims of "defamation" or incitement against "religions," which has been addressed exclusively to protect criticism of Islam. You could also remind him that the underlying concerns can be addressed through less divisive approaches.

USCIRF has paid close attention to Egypt during its ten-year history, not only because of its significance in the region, but because Egypt is both an important ally of the United States and one of the largest recipients of U.S. aid. In addition, as you stated in your Cairo speech, Al-Azhar University is a long-standing Sunni Muslim center of learning in the region. USCIRF repeatedly has expressed concern about the serious limitations on the freedom of religion or belief perpetrated through law and policy, or permitted by the government. In some cases, these limitations on religious freedom have encouraged extremist elements in Egyptian society and undermined the growth of civil society. Due to such persistent, serious infringements on religious freedom, in May USCIRF again placed Egypt on its Watch List of countries requiring close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the government.

USCIRF concluded that religious freedom violations continue to affect Coptic Orthodox and other Christians, Jews, and Baha'is, as well as members of minority Muslim communities and Muslim dissidents. Reports of religiously-motivated attacks, discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations against these communities remain widespread. There is continued prosecution in state security courts and imprisonment for disfavored Muslims and dissidents who have been accused of blasphemy and criticizing the Egyptian government. The government also has not responded adequately to combat widespread and virulent anti-Semitism in the education system and the state-controlled and semi-official media.

The Egyptian state security services oversee religious affairs in Egypt and restrict the religious activities of Muslims, Coptic Orthodox Christians, and others. Interference, harassment, and surveillance by the state security services are significant problems for members of all religious groups. The potential for violence, including conspiracy to commit acts of terror, is a valid matter of state security. However, removing the religion "portfolio" from the state security services and placing responsibility for religious affairs in a more transparent and politically accountable section of the government would establish both effective preventative security measures and appropriate protection of human rights. This change would allow members of all religious groups in Egypt to conduct their day-to-day affairs without undue interference by the security services.

As mentioned above, an increase in violent attacks by militant groups on religious minorities, particularly Christians, is an ongoing concern, especially in rural Upper Egypt. In recent months, there have been several incidents of attacks on Christians and their property throughout Egypt. In late June, the Commission expressed concern at reports of attacks by militants targeting Christians in the small Egyptian village of Ezbet Boshra-East resulting in injuries to both Christian and Muslims. Some reports suggested that Egyptian security services did not intervene to prevent the violence. Furthermore, in March, several Baha'i homes in a small village in the Sohag province were vandalized and destroyed by Muslim villagers.

USCIRF has found that the Egyptian government has not taken sufficient steps to protect members of its religious minority communities, or, in many cases, to punish those responsible for violence or other severe violations of religious freedom. Only in very few cases have perpetrators of violence been arrested and convicted. This kind of impunity signals that perpetrators face no consequences for such acts. The Egyptian government clearly has a responsibility to do better – from more thorough and comprehensive investigations of violent acts to transparent and fair judicial proceedings.

Furthermore, for all Christian groups, government permission is required to build a new church or repair an existing one, and the approval process for church construction is time-consuming and inflexible. Thus, the Egyptian government should implement procedures that would ensure that all places of worship are subject to the same transparent, non-discriminatory, and efficient regulations regarding construction and maintenance.

Mr. President, USCIRF was encouraged by your comments on religious freedom during the historic Cairo speech to the Muslim world in June. Your decision to deliver the speech from Cairo sent a message to other countries in the region that Egypt would serve as a barometer for progress on democracy and human rights reforms in the months and years ahead. As a consequence, the United States must take every opportunity to hold the Egyptian government accountable for its adherence to international human rights norms. Therefore, USCIRF urges your Administration to establish a timetable with the Egyptian government for implementation of specific political and human rights reforms. We stand ready to assist the Administration in developing specific proposals related to religious freedom and combating extremism.

I respectfully urge you to raise these important issues in your discussions with President Mubarak. Thank you for considering USCIRF's views.

Sincerely,
Leonard Leo
Chair

Please click [here to view the letter in PDF](#) .

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director, at tcarter@uscirf.gov or (202) 523-3257 `begin_of_the_skype_highlighting` (202) 523-3257

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USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.