

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 27, 2000

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Friday wrote to President Clinton to raise the issue of ongoing violations of the Coptic Christian community's religious freedom rights. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak arrives in the United States on a state visit today. The text of the letter follows:

March 24, 2000

The Honorable William J. Clinton
President of the United States Of America
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Re: Treatment of Coptic Christians by Egyptian Government

Dear Mr. President,

Next week President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt will return to the United States on a state visit. On behalf of the U.S. Commission On International Religious Freedom, I urge you to raise with him his government's ongoing violations of certain religious freedom rights of the Coptic Christian community, an issue raised by the Commission in our letter dated June 24, 1999, written to you on the eve of President Mubarak's last visit to Washington.

We are particularly concerned about the Egyptian government's response to repeated violence against Copts in the village of Al-Kosheh, 300 miles south of Cairo, in Sohag governate. Local police, in the course of investigating the murder of two Copts, arrested and tortured or abused hundreds of Copts from the village.

Not surprisingly, this cycle of violence against the largest religious minority in Egypt recently reignited in the same village of Al-Kosheh. On January 1-3, 2000, crowds of Muslims attacked their Coptic neighbors in their homes, shops and fields, killing 21 Copts and firebombing homes and businesses. One Muslim was also killed. Local police reportedly withdrew from the scene immediately prior to the attack.

The Egyptian government has offered to provide token compensation to the victims in Al-Kosheh. However, the Commission fears that local prosecutors will again resort to blaming the victims and that justice will once again languish. Our Government's reiteration to Mr. Mubarak that promotion of religious freedom is critical to Egyptian-American relations can be a step toward mitigating that possibility.

Egypt remains a home in which six million members of the Coptic Orthodox Church experience serious and pervasive religious discrimination. According to the State Department's most recent Human Rights Report released February 25, Christians who proselytize are subject to arrest. Permits to build Christian churches can only be issued by President Mubarak, and obtaining permits to repair churches can be difficult and delayed interminably. Yet mosques and the salaries of their imams are paid for out of public funds. Therefore, we hope and urge that President's Mubarak's visit provides an occasion for a serious discussion of religious freedom in Egypt.

Respectfully,

Rabbi David Saperstein
Chair

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Rabbi David Saperstein
- Dean Michael K. Young