

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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, ext. 27

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) wrote to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice requesting that the United States urge President Mubarak to prevent the imminent deportation of hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers back to Sudan, where many of them reportedly faced religious persecution.

The text of the letter follows:

Dear Secretary Rice:

On behalf of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, I am writing to request that you urge President Mubarak to prevent the imminent deportation of hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers back to Sudan, where many of them reportedly faced religious persecution.

As you are aware, approximately 3,000 Sudanese had been staging a peaceful protest in Cairo since September. On December 30, Egyptian police attempted to disperse the assembly by firing water cannons at the protesters and beating many of them. In the ensuing violence, at least 25 men, women and children died.

The deaths at the hands of the Egyptian police warrant an independent inquiry. Rather than initiating an investigation, however, the Egyptian government chose to arrest 2,500 of the protesters, holding more than 650 in prisons to be deported to Sudan on the grounds that they are either "illegal immigrants or refugees who violated security conditions." The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was initially given three days to interview all 650 of them to determine which were in need of protection from deportation. The UNHCR flew staff in from its headquarters to supplement the number of interviewers, but asked the Egyptian authorities for an additional month. The Egyptian government gave UNHCR little more than a week, requiring that the agency finish talking to the detainees by Sunday, January 15.

UNHCR has repeatedly asked the Egyptian authorities that "no one (among the Sudanese) be deported." Today, UNHCR further stated that: "Egypt acceded in 1981 to the 1951 Refugee Convention and as a result has basic responsibilities towards refugees and asylum seekers, including registration and status determination. Deportation of persons of concern to UNHCR is considered a violation of the Convention."

The December 30 incident should be investigated, and the appropriate officials should be held accountable if excessive force was employed in dispersing the protesters. Instead, Egypt has ordered many potential witnesses - who claim to be either refugees or asylum seekers -- deported without access to a meaningful refugee status determination.

After more than two decades of civil war, Sudan is in the process of implementing its peace agreement. The Commission is currently on mission to Sudan to investigate progress in the

area of human rights - and particularly religious freedom - in the context of that agreement. At this time, however, conditions in Sudan are such that the international community has not yet considered ending international protection for any Sudanese refugees. Moreover, according to UNHCR, some of the asylum seekers facing deportation are from the Darfur region, which continues to be beset by genocide.

We urge the United States Government to publicly - and without further delay - call upon the Egyptian government to initiate an inquiry into the tragic incident of December 30, and to prevent the involuntary removal of any Sudanese asylum seeker or refugee who may have been involved in this tragic incident.

Sincerely,

Michael Cromartie
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.

Michael Cromartie
- Felice D. Gaer