

June 30, 2007: USCIRF Concerned Over Rights Backsliding in Egypt

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WASHINGTON-The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom is concerned over the detention of five Muslim dissidents in Egypt, another indication of backsliding by the Egyptian government in human rights protections including the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. Five members of an extended family belonging to the so-called Koranists were arrested in Egypt at the end of May. The Koranists are a small group that accepts only the Koran as its sole source of religious guidance and thus has been accused by the Egyptian government in the past of practicing beliefs deemed to deviate from Islamic law. The detainees include Abdellatif Muhammad Said, who has been working on a Web site promoting reformist views of Islam, and Amr Tharwat, an employee of a pro-democracy center headed by one of Egypt's most well-known human rights and political reform advocates, Saad Eddin Ibrahim. The government has not said under what charges the men are being held, although the Arabic language daily newspaper, Al-Masry al Youm, has said they face charges of "denigrating religions." The Commission has learned that the detainees have alleged ill-treatment or even torture by state security services. "The U.S. government should promptly raise at the highest levels of the Egyptian government the arrests of the five Koranist members, who may be subject to ill-treatment," said Felice D. Gaer, chair of the Commission. The five are in State Security Services detention, which has a long and well-documented record of poor treatment of detainees. Serious problems of discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities, as well as non-conforming Muslims, remain widespread in Egypt. Earlier this year, a court in Alexandria convicted and sentenced Abdel Karim Suleiman, an Internet blogger, to four years in prison: three years for insulting Islam and inciting sectarian strife and one year for criticizing Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. The Commission is also concerned over a case nearing its conclusion in an appeal being heard by Egypt's Supreme Administrative Court, which is expected to rule on July 1. The appeal is by 45 Coptic Christians who want to receive official recognition of their return to Christianity on their national identity cards. In April, a lower court turned down their request. The Commission has recommended that the U.S. government urge the Egyptian government to remove de facto responsibility for religious affairs from the State Security Services, and to repeal Article 98(f) in the Penal Code which criminalizes insulting Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. In addition, the U.S. government should call on the Egyptian government to ensure that every Egyptian is protected against discrimination by modifying the national identity card either to omit mention of religious affiliation or to make such mention optional. The full list of Commission recommendations regarding freedom of religion in Egypt can be found in the Annual Report. Felice D. Gaer, Chair • Michael Cromartie, Vice Chair • Elizabeth H. Prodromou, Vice Chair • Nina Shea, Vice Chair • Don Argue • Preeti D. Bansal • Imam Talal Y. Eid • Richard D. Land • Leonard A. Leo • Ambassador John V. Hanford III, Ex-Officio • Joseph R. Crapa, Executive Director