

6/26/09: USCIRF Expresses Concern over Reported Attacks on Coptic Orthodox Christians in Egypt

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WASHINGTON, DC - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is concerned at reports of attacks targeting Coptic Orthodox Christians in the small Egyptian village of Ezbet Boshra-East.

USCIRF has learned that Egyptian authorities reportedly have released from custody all those suspects who were originally arrested earlier this week. Local authorities reportedly are conducting an ongoing investigation even though persons involved in the violence appear to be free.

"This latest incident is another example of the upsurge of violence against Coptic Christians we have seen in the past few years," said Felice D. Gaer, chair of the Commission. "The Commission has long expressed concern that the Egyptian government does not do enough to protect Christians and their property in Egypt, nor does the government adequately bring perpetrators of such violence to justice."

On June 21, Muslim villagers looted and attacked private homes and a building used for Christian gatherings and religious services in Ezbet Boshra-East. According to reports, a group of Christians from Cairo were visiting a pastor who lives in the building. This apparently caught the attention of local residents, particularly Muslims. Soon after, it is alleged that a group of Muslims began looting. Several Christians and Muslims sustained injuries and some of the homes and the building were damaged. In addition, crops were uprooted by Muslim rioters on property owned by Christian farmers. A curfew reportedly is in place, although most Christians remain in their homes for fear of additional attacks.

Initial reports say that state security services did little to prevent the violence from occurring. This repeats the established pattern that security services do not adequately protect Christian citizens in many localities.

For all Christians in Egypt, 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. Even some permits that have been approved cannot be acted upon because of interference by the state security services at both the local and national levels.

"The Commission recommends that the Egyptian government implement procedures to ensure that all places of worship are subject to the same transparent, non-discriminatory, and efficient regulations regarding construction and maintenance," said Ms. Gaer. "If the Egyptian government would pass and implement such a law, it may help in stemming some of the violence targeting Christians who are forced to convert private homes and buildings into churches because they cannot get permission to build an appropriate place of worship."

Egypt has been cited by 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, as well as non-conforming Muslims.

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.

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