

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON DC - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) called on the Egyptian government to ensure the resumption tomorrow of the trial of the men charged with seven murders in the small town of Naga Hammadi in southern Egypt. Court proceedings have been postponed numerous times since February.

“Justice delayed is justice denied. Is it possible for Coptic Orthodox Christians to get justice in the Egyptian court system?” asked Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. “USCIRF was encouraged by Egypt’s initial decision to bring the Naga Hammadi case to trial quickly, but now, eight months later, there have been no convictions and there is no end in sight. Unfortunately, this only encourages further violence and is reminiscent of so many past trials where justice was never served.”

On January 6, three Muslim men were charged with killing six Christians and one Muslim security guard on Coptic Christmas eve outside a church in Naga Hammadi. The trial began in February in a state security court and resumes tomorrow in the Qena governorate.

A USCIRF delegation visited Egypt earlier this year just weeks after the Naga Hammadi incident and concluded that there was a window of opportunity for the Egyptian government to conduct a thorough investigation and to bring to justice perpetrators of sectarian violence before the upcoming parliamentary elections in November when government attention will shift.

“That window is closing quickly,” said Mr. Leo. “The Egyptian government’s negligence has created a climate of impunity. The government knows well that accountability could serve as a deterrent, and would demonstrate that the government is interested in addressing the issue through application of the rule of law and not just reconciliation sessions.”

In recent years, in response to sectarian violence, Egyptian authorities have conducted reconciliation sessions between Muslims and Christians as a way of easing tensions and resolving disputes rather than bringing perpetrators to account. However, in its most recent annual human rights report on Egypt, the U.S. Department of State found that reconciliation sessions not only “prevented the prosecution of perpetrators of crimes against Copts and precluded their recourse to the judicial system for restitution” but also “contributed to a climate of impunity that encouraged further assaults.”

USCIRF has recommended that the United States should more aggressively press the

Egyptian government to prosecute perpetrators responsible for sectarian violence and to remove de facto responsibility for religious affairs from the state security services, with the exception of cases involving violence or the advocacy of violence.

Due to persistent and serious religious freedom concerns, Egypt remains on USCIRF's Watch List. Egypt has been on the Watch List since 2002.

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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