

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) expressed concern today that incitement to violence in Egyptian media and government-funded mosques is contributing to increasing sectarian tensions between Muslims and Christians in advance of parliamentary elections scheduled for later this month.

“We’ve seen a clear uptick in recent weeks of incitement coming from media outlets and clerics espousing sectarian hatred and violence,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. “This kind of rhetoric goes too far and stokes the fire of extremists looking for ammunition to justify violent acts against religious minorities,” said Mr. Leo.

Over the past year, human rights groups inside Egypt have expressed concern about extremist advances in the country and have criticized the government for not adequately counteracting this problem. In recent weeks, Egyptian government officials have spoken out against incitement to violence, particularly in the media, and temporarily shut down several satellite television stations, including Al-Nas and Al-Rahma, that aired programming espousing religious hatred and violence.

Additionally, earlier this week, more than 10 Coptic Christian homes and several businesses were burned and looted in the Qena province of southern Egypt after rumors spread, including in local media, about a romantic relationship between a Christian man and Muslim woman. Security officials imposed a curfew and arrested several Muslims.

“While past elections in Egypt typically have not been an occasion for violence along sectarian lines, the kind of incitement and the increased number of attacks we're seeing could be a precursor for further incidents targeting religious minorities, particularly Christians. The Commission welcomes the fact that some Egyptian officials and religious leaders have spoken out against incitement to violence in the media. Nevertheless, as elections approach, the Egyptian government must be increasingly vigilant of extremist threats and take further measures to protect members of minority communities and prosecute perpetrators of violence,” said Mr. Leo.

USCIRF urges the Egyptian government to aggressively address incitement to violence and discrimination against disfavored Muslims and non-Muslims by:

--removing and prosecuting government-funded clerics and other officials who incite violence against individual members of these minority communities;

--dismissing or disciplining government-funded clerics and officials who espouse intolerance;

--publicly and officially refuting incitement to violence and discrimination by clerics and the media against Muslim minority communities, such as the Koranists, and members of non-Muslim religious minorities, such as Christians and Baha'is; and

--rescinding any previous fatwas issued by Al-Azhar, a preeminent government-funded Sunni Muslim center of learning, that are discriminatory toward or incite violence against dissident Muslims or non-Muslim minority communities.

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, Secretary of State and Congress.

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