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WASHINGTON, D.C. - On New Year's Day, a suicide bomber attacked a Coptic Orthodox Church in Alexandria, Egypt, killing at least 21 and wounding scores more. Reports indicate that 20 people have been detained for questioning, but it is unclear whether they were directly connected to the violence.

"The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) condemns in the strongest possible terms the bombing and targeting of Christians and their places of worship," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. "This attack all too clearly demonstrates the ongoing problem of unchecked violence against Christians in Egypt. The Commission regrets all loss of life and calls for a thorough investigation to ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice, something that has been elusive in Egypt in previous attacks on religious minorities. The Egyptian government must also take visible steps to ensure the protection of Coptic places of worship before, during, and after the Coptic Christmas of January 7."

Serious problems of discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities, as well as disfavored Muslims, remain widespread in Egypt. In USCIRF's 2010 Annual Report, the Commission noted that the reporting period marked a significant upsurge in violence targeting Coptic Orthodox Christians. The Egyptian government has not taken sufficient steps to halt the repression of and discrimination against Christians and other religious believers, or, in many cases, to punish those responsible for violence or other severe violations of religious freedom.

"Sadly, due to violent attacks, Christmas was not a time of peace for Christians in many countries around the world, including Egypt," said Leo. "At present, there is no real deterrent for those who target Egyptian citizens because of their religious identity. Until there is justice and accountability, the Christian minority, and other minorities in Egypt, will remain vulnerable to extremists and terrorists."

The Alexandria attack is just one in a series of attacks on Christians in Egypt. In January of last year, six Christians and a Muslim guard were killed in a drive-by shooting on Coptic Christmas Eve in the southern Egyptian town of Naga Hammadi. To date, no one has been brought to justice. Closing arguments concluded in the trial of the three alleged perpetrators last month and a final verdict is expected on January 16.

"The Commission welcomed President Obama's statement on the attack and his call that the Egyptian government bring the attackers 'to justice for this barbaric and heinous act,'" said Leo. "We hope the U.S. government will vigorously follow up on the President's words and press Cairo to see that all involved are held to account. The reports of ongoing violence connected to

other demonstrations require vigorous government action to protect not only places of worship but also members of the Christian minority, as a means of preventing a cycle of reprisals.”

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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