

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is concerned with the acquittals of two of the three men charged with killing six Coptic Orthodox Christians and one Muslim security guard in the town of Naga Hammadi, Egypt, in January 2010.

“It took over a year, and the Egyptian state security court committed serious breaches of due process and fairness in the case of the killings of six Christians and one Muslim in Naga Hammadi,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. “A new Egyptian government must, in the regular criminal courts, prosecute perpetrators for sectarian killings in the country, and the government should complete a thorough investigation and vigorously prosecute and bring to justice those responsible for the New Year’s Eve bombing in Alexandria that took the lives of at least 23 and injured nearly 100. Incomplete justice does very little to address the perpetual cycle of violence targeting religious minorities that has remained unchecked by the government in Egypt.”

Last month, a state security court in the Qena governorate in Upper Egypt convicted and sentenced to death Mohamed Ahmed Hussein, one of the three alleged attackers in the case. On Sunday, the court ratified the verdict against Hussein but acquitted the two other men who were known to be accomplices in the killings. Hussein is widely identified as the man who pulled the trigger in the shooting that killed seven people outside a church on Coptic Christmas more than a year ago.

Because Egypt continues to operate under a state of emergency, the government has the option to hear cases involving terrorism or drug trafficking in state security courts rather than criminal courts. The emergency laws are widely cited as being restrictive on many human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. In addition, the state security court does not provide the right of appeal in a guilty verdict. Egyptian and international human rights groups have at times been critical of the court’s procedures and limits on the rule of law and due process.

For years, the Egyptian government has failed to take 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.

“The government also should ensure that Christian and other non-Muslim places of worship receive heightened security, particularly in the current climate where religious minorities are increasingly vulnerable to extremist attacks, including threats to eradicate Christians from the region,” continued Mr. Leo.

USCIRF reiterated its long-standing and urgent recommendation that the Egyptian government lift the state of emergency as soon as possible; pass a unified law on building and maintaining places of worship; repeal bans on religious minorities, such as Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses; remove religious affiliation from identity documents, and revoke Egypt's blasphemy law.

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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