

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 10, 2011

WASHINGTON, DC – In response to deadly religious violence in Egypt over the weekend, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is calling on the Egyptian government to conduct a thorough investigation to ensure that the perpetrators of the violence are brought to justice in civilian, not military, courts, something that has been elusive in Egypt in previous attacks on religious minorities which continues to foster an atmosphere of impunity.

At least 12 Christians and Muslims were killed and more than 200 people were wounded as Islamist extremists attacked Christians at the St. Mina Church in the Imbaba district of Cairo. Another church, the Church of the Virgin Mary, was burned to the ground by extremists and several Christian-owned shops were vandalized and looted.

“The Egyptian government has failed to protect religious minorities from violent attacks, particularly Coptic Orthodox Christians, including during the post-Mubarak transitional period when minority communities have proven to be increasingly vulnerable. This fact, when combined with the ongoing climate of impunity in Egypt, explains why USCIRF recommended last month, for the first time, that Egypt should be designated a country of particular concern, or CPC, for engaging in and tolerating religious freedom violations.” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair.

This past weekend, rumors spread that a Coptic Christian woman, who allegedly had converted to Islam in 2010, had disappeared and was being held against her will at the St. Mina Church. Such claims often trigger tensions between Muslims and Christians, just as the veracity of such rumors often have been disputed. In this case, Egyptian police reportedly confirmed yesterday that such rumors were untrue.

“It appears that Islamist extremists used the rumor as a pretext to attack Coptic Christians and their places of worship,” said Mr. Leo. “USCIRF noted in its annual report late last month that Islamist militants have used a decrease in police and security presence since former President Mubarak stepped down on February 11 to target religious minorities, particularly Coptic Orthodox Christians, the largest religious minority in Egypt. This has alarmed not only the minority Coptic Christian community but also those in civil society who see these actions as threatening to the ongoing political transition in Egypt. The Egyptian government must not permit extremists from intimidating, harassing, or committing violent acts against any Egyptian,” said Mr. Leo.

Egyptian authorities reportedly detained 190 people in connection with the violence and have vowed to conduct military trials to bring perpetrators to justice. The Supreme Council of Armed Forces reportedly has said it will increase security at places of worship and activate laws dealing with terrorism to give police and security more power to prevent further violence.

Religious freedom conditions in Egypt have deteriorated under the Mubarak regime over the past several years, particularly for religious minorities. Since February 11, conditions have not improved and attacks targeting religious minorities have continued. Attacks on minorities, particularly Coptic Christians, including by Islamist militants imposing extra-judicial punishments, have risen and have resulted in several deaths and injuries. Sufi Muslims also have experienced increased attacks on mosques and shrines by Islamist militant groups since February 11.

“As a consequence of CPC designation, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should direct a portion of its existing \$1.3 billion in military aid toward heightened security for religious minority communities and their places of worship, particularly Coptic Orthodox Christians, Sufi Muslims, and Jews,” said Mr. Leo.

In addition, USCIRF recommends that the Egyptian government should:

- establish a special unit in the Office of the Public Prosecutor dedicated to investigating acts of violence against Egyptian citizens on the basis of religion or belief, particularly Coptic Orthodox Christians, vigorously prosecuting and bringing to justice perpetrators, and ensuring compensation for victims;

- ensure that de facto responsibility for religious affairs does not fall under the jurisdiction of the new domestic security agency, with the exception of espionage cases or cases involving violence or the advocacy of violence, including conspiracy to commit acts of terror;
- pass a unified law that would subject all places of worship to the same transparent, non-discriminatory, and efficient regulations regarding construction and maintenance;
- discontinue the use of reconciliation sessions as a bypass for punishing perpetrators, commensurate with the gravity of the crime and in accordance with the rule of law; and
- address incitement to imminent violence and discrimination against disfavored Muslims and non-Muslims by:

-- prosecuting in regular criminal courts government-funded clerics, government officials, or individuals who incite violence against Muslim minority communities or individual members of non-Muslim religious minority communities; and --disciplining or dismissing government-funded clerics who espouse intolerance.

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.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at tcarter@uscirf.gov or (202) 523-3257.