

The following article appeared in the MidEast Christian News on July 4, 2012:

The Third Annual Coptic Solidarity Conference which took place only one day after the victory of an Islamist in the Egyptian presidential elections, focused on U.S. National Security and Advancing Human and Minority Rights in Egypt.

Attending the conference was Ms Katrina Lantos Swett, chairperson of the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

Dr Katrina Lantos Swett who was appointed to the Commission in March 2012 and is serving her first term, said that the biggest problem faced by the Copts in Egypt continues to be one of impunity.

In her keynote address to the conference, the USCIRF Chair confirmed that religious freedom conditions including those of Egypt's Coptic population "have been extremely concerning"

Describing the current situation of the Copts in Egypt as "intolerable" Dr Lantos considered Hosni Mubarak's 30 years of presidency as a continued failure to protect innocent people from attacks "launched by intolerant individuals as well as by radical religious groups"

In fact, according to Dr Lantos the widespread discrimination against religious minorities and "disfavored religious groups, from dissident Sunni and Shi'a Muslims to Baha'is, as well as Copts and other Christians" was tolerated while "allowing state-controlled media and state-funded mosques to deliver incendiary messages against them"

For the 18 days of the Egyptian revolution of January 25 the world heard the millions who had occupied Tahrir Square chanting "Muslims and Christians hand in hand Muslims and Christians in a united country" and also "By Hook or by Crook we will get rid of sectarianism"

But the dream was short-lived and as the slogans faded away, the ugly face of sectarianism, discrimination and “unease” that existed for decades between Muslims and Copts emerged to the surface

Though that “unease” re-surfaced much sooner than expected, Dr Lantos believes that it would be right to think that the January Revolution marked a step forward in the eradication of sectarianism in Egypt and gave the Copts the same rights as their Muslim compatriots.

Dr Lantos believes that some positive elements are to be found in a document prepared by Al Azhar University, and which she considers as one of the positive signs that could be marking the eradication of sectarianism.

However and despite some positive signs Dr Lantos insists that “Copts need to be protected, Copts aren’t being protected, and Copts must be protected” from attacks on their right to order their lives and practice their beliefs in dignity and peace”