



General Assembly

Distr.: General
15 February 2012

English only

Human Rights Council

Nineteenth session

Agenda item 4

Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by the Jubilee Campaign, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[6 February 2012]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Domestic human rights and religious freedom situation in Egypt**

While many took as a positive sign that both Christians and Muslims were protesting together in Tahrir Square during the Egyptian Revolution, it soon became evident that the future of Coptic Christians (“Copts”) in Egypt post-Mubarak is more precarious than ever.

For years, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has reported serious, widespread, and long-standing human rights violations against Copts in Egypt. It even recommended in its report of April 28, 2011 to add Egypt to the list of “countries of particular concern” on matters of religious freedom. Confronted by these violations time and again, the Egyptian government has failed to take the necessary steps to halt the systematic discrimination and repression against Copts and other minorities. Taking it a step further from failing to protect its citizens, the Egyptian military itself become the perpetrator, or a protector of perpetrators, of crimes against the Copts in 2011.

On January 1, 2011, a car bomb exploded in front of a Coptic Orthodox Church in Alexandria, killing at least 21 and injuring at least 79. The incident happened a few minutes after midnight as Copts were leaving a New Year's Eve Church service. Many in Egypt believe that the Ministry of Interior's security apparatus under the Mubarak regime was behind the attacks in an attempt to cause strife between the Egyptian people. Despite numerous appeals by the church and the victims' families, a criminal investigation by the police and the public prosecutor has yet to be initiated.

Despite promises by the post-Revolution authorities, over 50 churches, previously closed by Mubarak's security apparatus, remain closed mostly for no reason but to appease local fanatic groups.

Repeated promises to issue a “unified law for houses of worship” were never met. A much more restrictive version of the draft law on regulating the building and repair of churches was proposed, but was never issued.

Dozens of incidents of violence by Salafists and/or other Islamist groups against Copts took place since January 2011. In many cases, these took the form of unwarranted collective punishment. Coptic homes, shops, businesses, fields and livestock were plundered and torched. Churches were attacked, burnt and destructed, using a variety of pretexts, in Sole, Guizeh (in March), Imbaba, Guizeh (in May), Ain-Shams, Cairo (in May). The authorities provided no protection and the perpetrators, often acting in mobs, were never brought to justice. In fact, the Coptic victims, acting in self-defense, are arrested and judged: On May 29, 2011, a Military Court sentenced two Copts to five years in jail each for violence and for trying to turn a factory into an unlicensed church.

On September 30, a church for which repair permits had just been obtained in Marinab, near Aswan, was burned and destroyed by a group of nearly 3,000 Salafists. The flames also burned down the homes of three Coptic families living close by. The Aswan governor was heard on TV shows justifying the acts of “our angry youth.”

** Coptic Solidarity, an NGO without consultative status, also shares the views expressed in this statement.

Maspero

On October 9, 2011, thousands of Copts took to the streets in Cairo to protest the destruction of yet another church, this time in Marinab, and the continued failure of the rulers to take any action. The demonstrators began in the Shubra neighborhood and were headed towards Maspero Square. The protesters were mainly families, including children and grandchildren, and youth activists. They were unarmed citizens and included many supporting Muslims. Most managed to arrive at Maspero safely, while some were slightly scratched after being attacked by unidentified rock-throwers along the way.

When the demonstrators arrived at Maspero, they were met with armored personnel carriers (APCs), and hundreds of riot police and special forces. Soldiers screamed “Allahu Akbar!” (“God is great”), and cursed “Infidels!” as they approached and attacked the protesters. Army vehicles charged at the protesters and reports of at least 10 protesters being crushed under APCs, including one with a crushed skull, have been made. In addition, witnesses confirmed that military personnel were seen firing live ammunition into the protesters, while the Health Ministry confirmed that at least 20 protesters underwent surgery for bullet wounds. Several eye-witnesses saw soldiers hurling the mutilated bodies of those run over into the nearby Nile River. In total, an estimated 27 Copts were killed, while numbers as high as 50 have been reported. The number of hospitalized wounded protesters is about 250.

State TV incitement

In the midst of the violence, state-owned TV news channels urged “honorable Egyptians” to take to the streets to “protect the military” from Christian protesters. Even as armored vehicles were running over Christian protesters, Egyptian TV broadcast footage of reporters saying, “Help, the Copts are killing our heroic, patriotic soldiers and burning Qurans!” One segment on Egyptian TV had an outraged reporter condemning Christians—“as if they were the Israeli enemy”—for killing “our noble protectors [soldiers], who never once fired a single shot.” As a result, many civilians took to the streets, brutally attacking Christians and their property. Hundreds of people were seen wielding clubs and machetes alongside riot police chanting “the people want to bring down the Christians”, and later “Islamic, Islamic.”

Egyptian TV also announced that three soldiers died at the hands of Copts but, officials at the TV station later admitted that this was not true. Due to Egyptian TV’s misinformation, several Egyptian reporters unequivocally condemned it. Anchorwoman Dina Rasmi said: “I am ashamed that I work at this despicable TV channel... Egyptian TV was effectively calling for civil war between Muslims and Christians... Egyptian TV has proven that it is a slave to those who rule.” Another news anchor, Mahmoud Yousif, announced that he “washes his hands of what Egyptian TV is broadcasting.”

Military council blames the Copts and claims to investigate itself

After the incident, Egypt’s Military Council held a news conference wherein senior official, Mahmoud Hegazy, insisted that the military would “never, never” run over civilians; that the very idea was “impossible, impossible!” and “Shame on those who accuse the Egyptian military of such things!...Never has our military run over a single person, not even when combating the Enemy [presumably, Israel]” Hegazy portrayed the Coptic protesters as the aggressors, attacking and killing “honorable” soldiers. Human Rights Watch interviewed 20 participants in the demonstration who consistently testified that between 6 and 7 p.m. on October 9 at least two APCs drove recklessly through crowds of demonstrators, in some

cases appearing to pursue them intentionally. The protest of thousands of Copts had been peaceful until that point. The large, heavy vehicles crushed and killed at least 10 demonstrators, autopsies later showed.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has yet to hold the security forces to account for the unwarranted use of force against the peaceful protesters. Instead, they have continued to insist that the demonstrators were responsible for inciting the violence and have cracked down on those criticizing the way they handled the demonstrations. “That the military is investigating itself over its conduct during the Maspero protests raises serious questions about the inquiry's impartiality,” said Amnesty International. “The authorities must launch a fully independent investigation into the policing of the protests and the death of protesters.”

Call to action

Attacks against Copts are not happening in a vacuum. The context is a government that has failed to respect the basic rights of religious minorities. Worse, Egypt's government-controlled media and government-funded mosques have engaged in incitement to violence, and its military has violently attacked its own people. True, Egypt is going through a difficult period, but Copts are doubly paying the price.

It is time to act decisively to protect Egypt's religious minorities. Not only is this a moral imperative, but the international community should understand that this is good for global security. The continued threat against the Coptic community undermines an important moderating influence in the region.

Recommendations to the Human Rights Council:

- To appoint a special rapporteur for the Copts and other religious minorities in Egypt.
- To urge Egypt to agree to a commission of inquiry into the Maspero massacre overseen by and reporting to the Human Rights Council;
- To urge Egypt to halt immediately violations of human rights by security forces;
- To urge Egypt to immediately stop the harassment of Human Rights Organizations as well as Pro-Democracy Groups and, to the contrary, to facilitate their job;
- To urge Egypt to ensure that the new constitution stipulate, in a unambiguous way, that Egypt abides by the United Nations Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Conventions; and,
- To urge Egypt to ensure the adoption of Affirmative Action policies, to be included in the new constitution, to remedy the serious problem of under-representation of Copts (and women) in the three branches of the state and the various bodies and organisms.