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Who are the Coptic Orthodox?

See updated HRWF list of documented cases of Coptic Orthodox prisoners [here](#).

HRWF (12.12.2016) - The Orthodox Churches are among the oldest Christian bodies in the world. The Coptic Orthodox Church, which is the particular focus of this chapter, traces its origins to Saint Mark, one of Jesus' apostles in the first century CE. It is led by the Patriarch of Alexandria, also known as the Coptic Pope.

The Egyptian port city of Alexandria was an important intellectual and cultural centre for centuries. It was also a prominent Christian centre until the Arab conquest of the seventh century. Even the word 'Copt' is derived from the word for 'Egypt' in the ancient language of the Egyptians. The Copts are the indigenous Christian people of Egypt. With about twelve million adherents, it is the country's largest church, although today it comprises less than eight percent of the overall population.

There is also a sizable diaspora of Coptic Orthodox in several African and Middle Eastern countries. Worldwide the Church has nearly twenty million members.

Coptic Christians played a visible role in the 2011 Arab Spring revolt which demanded the resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. They were frequently caught in the crossfire of the various political groups vying for power during that turbulent period.

When Pope Shenouda III died the following year, there was widespread speculation over the future of Muslim-Coptic relations, as tensions remained high at that time. In November 2012, the 118th Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Tawadros II, was chosen according to ancient tradition, his name picked by a blindfolded child from a glass bowl where the names of two other candidates had also been placed.

Relations between the Coptic Church and the majority Muslim population remain fragile, especially with the rise of extremist narratives in the region over the past few years. In February 2015, militants claiming loyalty to ISIS beheaded twenty-one Coptic Christians on a beachfront in Libya. They were Egyptian workers and are now considered saints and martyrs by the Church.

Teachings

At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, the Coptic Church took a different position over a fine point of Christology that led to its separation from the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, a schism which exists to this day. The precise nature of the conflict is still disputed by historians.

What is *not* under dispute is that the Coptic tradition has remained firmly rooted in the historic Orthodox Christian faith with an ardent devotion to its apostolic origins. It emphasises the foundational teachings of the Church Fathers, creeds, and early Church councils and the centrality of the Sacraments, holiness of life, and the importance of prayer. Monasticism is still a prominent dimension of Coptic faith. Like in other Orthodox traditions, priests are permitted to be married, and bishops are drawn from monastic communities and remain celibate.

Throughout its history, the Coptic Church has known great suffering for its beliefs. Under the Emperor Diocletian, nearly one million men, women, and children were killed. Other waves of persecution and mass killings were to follow. Notably, the Church has consistently refused any favoured relationship with successive governments of Egypt, upholding in principle the separation of religion and the state.

Controversies

Coptic Orthodox Christians find themselves in an increasingly hostile religious environment. In **Egypt**, politico-religious convulsions in recent years are bound to produce unpleasant circumstances for religious minorities of any sort. The Coptic

Orthodox Church is particularly vulnerable, however, not so much for its actual teachings as it is for its visibility as Egypt's most sizable religious group in an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim majority nation. The Copts' historic presence in Egypt provides scant protection against conservative Islamist violence and a failed judicial system that will not bring perpetrators to justice.

It is true that Copts are especially exposed to vaguely-worded criminal charges, such as blasphemy, insulting the Prophet or 'causing harm or damage to the public interest.' Accusations of this nature have led to angry reactions, massive riots, and pogroms against the Coptic community.

Even when no offense was intended, any hint of mockery toward Islam or discussions over the life of Prophet Muhammad can trigger an extreme response from people who are looking for places to vent their rage.

Orthodox in Prison in Egypt

In 2015, six Coptic Orthodox Christians were in prison on fabricated or false blasphemy charges.

Kirollos Shawki ATALLAH was arrested in 2014 and sentenced to three years in 2015 for posting photos on Facebook deemed defamatory to Islam.

Bishoy Armia BOULOUS (until his conversion Mohammed Hegazy) was arrested in 2013 and sentenced in 2014 to five years in prison for filming demonstrations against Christians. He was declared not guilty by an appellate judge on 28th December 2015. However, he remains in prison for charges of blasphemy filed against him in 2009.

Makram DIAB was arrested in 2012 and sentenced to six years in prison for telling a Salafi Muslim that Muhammad had more than four wives, resulting in an argument.

Bishoy KAMEEL KAMEL GARAS was sentenced in 2012 to six years in prison: three years for allegedly defaming Islam and the Prophet Mohammed, two years for insulting the president and one year for insulting Mohamed Safwat who made the allegations against him. The offenses were made on a Facebook page falsely posted in his name. A hearing for his acquittal was set for September 2015 then delayed until early 2016.

Gamal Abdu MASSOUD was sentenced to three years by a juvenile court (he was then sixteen years old) for posting cartoons mocking Islam and the Prophet Muhammad on Facebook in December 2011 and sharing them with other students. He was released in April 2015.

Ishaq MEDHAT was initially charged in August 2015 with 'inciting sectarian strife' and 'harming national unity' and later with 'insulting religion.' He was distributing Bibles on the street when he was arrested. There is no law that makes the act of attempting to convert illegal, but Article 98 of the penal code is often used to criminalise the use of religion for the purposes of 'inciting sectarian strife and harming national unity and social peace.' He was kept in pre-trial custody for at least two weeks. No further details are known of his case.

Conclusions

Salafist influence in the Middle East and beyond has contributed to the fragmentation of Egyptian society, a society which has traditionally been associated with tolerance for religious diversity. The toxic environment of political rivalry, deep social hostility, restrictive government policies and abusive practices of police and security forces has

made the country untenable for many Egyptians today and especially minority groups such as Coptic Orthodox Christians.

This has limited freedoms for Copts to practice their faith without fear of judicial or violent consequences. The current Egyptian government has a particular role to play in ensuring the freedom of religion or belief as guaranteed by its constitutional law. This can only be safeguarded by a judiciary that functions independently of any partisan or state influence. Judicial reform of this nature must become a greater priority of the el-Sisi government if it is to achieve the progress toward democracy to which it aspires.

Cairo: 25 killed by bomb blast near St Mark's Cathedral

Explosion during mass targeted worshippers inside St Peter's Church next to the main Coptic church in central Cairo. [See video here.](#)

Al Jazeera (11.12.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2he06nQ> - A bomb blast has killed at least 25 people during Sunday mass inside a Cairo church near the main Coptic Christian cathedral, according to Egyptian state TV.

The explosion ripped through St Peter's Church at around 10:00am local time, wounding at least another 49 people, according to Egyptian health ministry cited on state TV.

St Peter's Church is beside St Mark's Cathedral, which is the seat of Egypt's Orthodox Christian church and is home to the office of its spiritual leader, Pope Tawadros II.

Services were being held in St Peter's on Sunday morning, while St Mark's Cathedral was being renovated.

A state-run news agency reported that a bomb was lobbed inside the church, though the AP news agency cited witnesses saying the bomb was planted inside the building itself.

"I found bodies, many of them women, lying on the pews. It was a horrible scene," cathedral worker Attiya Mahrous, who rushed to the chapel after he heard the blast, told AP. His clothes and hands were stained with blood and his hair matted with dust.

The presidency declared national mourning after the attack.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

About 10 percent of Egypt's 82-million population are Christians.

According to Mohamad Elmasry, an associate professor of Media and Cultural Studies at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, the "barbaric attack against Coptic Christians is not an aberration".

"[The attack] represents the continuation of a cycle of violence that has continued unabated since Egypt's July 2013 military coup," Elmasry told Al Jazeera.

Egypt's Youm7 newspaper has posted video footage on its Twitter account of the aftermath of the bombing:

"Since the coup, the Egyptian government and ISIS-affiliated 'terrorists' have traded attacks. The government has cast an unnecessarily wide 'terrorism' net, carrying out unprecedented human rights violations, including several mass killings, against moderate members of the political opposition."

The coup, which overthrew Mohamed Morsi , Egypt's first democratically elected president and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood , brought with it a dramatic increase in violence, particularly in the Sinai region.

On Friday, six policemen were killed in a bomb attack in Cairo claimed by an armed group known as the Hasm movement.

The Egyptian army, under General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and its police forces have faced dozens of attacks from several armed groups that have continued to grow in recent years.

"Perhaps more than anything, today's attack demonstrates the extent to which current President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who came to power largely on a security platform, has failed to deliver on one of his most important campaign promises," Elmasry added.

Muslim extremists torch Coptic Christian homes and businesses

Watch video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNQmy-itJ8k>

Morning Star News (30.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2hazIIh> - Dozens of Coptic Christians in Upper Egypt are rebuilding their lives after Muslim extremists on Friday (Nov. 25) attacked them on suspicions that they were converting a meeting hall and community center into a church building.

After noon prayers in Al-Nagameesh village in Sohag Governorate, a group of Muslims set ablaze the community center for the elderly. They then moved on to the village, where they looted and attacked more than 10 homes and a handful of businesses, all Coptic-owned, with Molotov cocktails and stones.

The fire gutted the events hall and left other buildings in ruins, according to human rights activists who requested anonymity for security reasons. Four Copts were slightly injured in the attack.

Because there is no church building in the village, the events hall and community center was the focal point for Al-Nagameesh's minority Christian community of about 2,000 people. Funerals, weddings and sometimes prayers were held there. A village priest identified only as Father Marqrious reportedly said that the building also had a nursery inside.

The problems started three days before the attack, when Marqrious held a service at the center to mark the one-year anniversary of his father's death. For unknown reasons, Muslim villagers who heard about the service thought the center was going to be changed into a church building, according to human rights advocates.

Two days before the attack, Muslim extremists went through the town handing out leaflets rejecting the establishment of any church building in the village and demanding faithful Muslims attack the hall and center.

The mob blocked firefighter access to the village and cut off the water supply, and firefighters were unable to reach the burning building until police showed up and suppressed the rioting crowd with tear gas. Police arrested 29 attackers, later releasing 15 of them. Fourteen remained in custody Wednesday (Nov. 30) pending an investigation.

Later on Friday (Nov. 25), the governor of Sohag, Ayman Mohamed Abdel Monaem, ordered a reconciliation meeting among the Christian and Muslim elders of the village to calm tensions.

The attack in Al-Nagameesh came three months after parliament passed a law regulating the building of churches in Egypt. The Egyptian government celebrated the law, but human rights advocates said it merely codified discriminatory standards between Muslims and Christians in Egypt for building houses of worship.

"The new law allows governors to deny church-building permits with no stated way to appeal, requires that churches be built 'commensurate with' the number of Christians in the area, and contains security provisions that risk subjecting decisions on whether to allow church construction to the whims of violent mobs," according to a statement from Human Rights Watch.

Christian children 'singled out for bullying' in Egyptian classrooms

World Watch Monitor (01.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2fbZzjp> - When 12-year-old Rahma Salem refused to wear a hijab to school in the Delta in northern Egypt, teachers ordered her to leave lesson after lesson and would not let her take part in any activity.

"I was made to stand all alone in the school courtyard. The headmistress later came to me and said: 'Here in school, you put on the headscarf. Outside, you may do as you wish.' She thought I was a Christian," said Rahma, the only girl – a Muslim – who dared to turn up to school with her hair uncovered.

"No girl can show up with her hair showing. They all have to wear the hijab," explained Salem to her interviewer on a talkshow on an independent satellite channel earlier this month, when asked if exceptions were made for Christian girls.

"Christian girls have to wear the hijab. As soon as the end-of-day bell rings, they start taking it off," said Salem.

When Salem's mother went to complain to the Higher Board of Education in her home town of Zagazig, she was told, "Stop being an idiot! Don't you want your daughter to be decent?"

Earlier, parents closed in on Salem's mother on the first day of school at the Kafr el-Ashraf Preparatory. "I was shocked when other mothers stopped me at the gate. 'What's that? How can your daughter show up like this?' I re-inspected my daughter's uniform, and incredulously asked what was wrong. 'Her head and neck have to be strictly covered!'" said the mothers, referring to the now-prevalent way Muslim women and girls dress, showing only their hands and face.

'Nasty looks'

The Kafr el-Ashraf case is not isolated. A number of parents across the country have reported rising intolerance towards pupils who do not wish to wear the veil, and bullying of non-Muslim children by teachers and by pupils who follow their lead.

On 18 October, Coptic newspaper Watani reported that another state school in the same province, Sharqia, was forcing all female students to wear a hijab. The director of al-Nassiriya School in Zagazig posted a large sign mandating Islamic dress on all girls as part of the school uniform.

For years, Christians have complained of harassment in classrooms. Some of their complaints relate to government policy, such as having to memorise parts of the Qur'an to pass mandatory Arabic exams. Others are a result of an ever-growing societal pressure.

Salem's mother said her daughter has been subjected to "huge psychological pressure". "The other girls themselves give her nasty looks. They look her up and down, and ostracise her," she said.

It is telling that the only pupil who dared raise the issue, 12-year-old Rahma, was a Muslim. Students from Egypt's Christian minority are in an even weaker position than Muslims to disobey the rules laid down by representatives of Islam and its votaries within society. Some Christian parents feel uncomfortable speaking to the mainstream media about their children's troubles at school.

Viola Samir, a seven-year-old Christian pupil at Kom el-Lufi Primary School in a village outside Samalout, in Minya province, 250km south of Cairo, told how the Islamic religious studies teacher had held eight Christian pupils in her class of 35 against their will, beating one who had not learnt the Qur'an by heart.

Religious education is an obligatory subject in all Egyptian schools. Usually, Christian students leave the class to gather in another for their Christian religious education, while Muslims, being more numerous, stay in their classes for the weekly sessions.

World Watch Monitor heard from Viola's father that: "When my daughter told the teacher that the extra texts were not part of the Arabic curriculum [which all students have to learn], she was severely punished by her teacher."

"The Christian religious studies teacher complained to the headmaster, but he took no disciplinary action against the Muslim teacher. In the end, the teacher allowed the Christian children to leave the class to join their Christian studies class," Viola's father added.

Another parent said his son was caned for not reciting verses from the Qur'an. Abanob Milad, 11, a pupil at El-Galaa Primary School, also in Samalout, had complained many times that his Arabic teacher was hostile to the Christians in his class.

"Once, the teacher, Mohamed, caned Abanob on the back of his hands, afterwards forcing him to stand with his face to the board and both arms up in the air for the entire length of the lesson. My son had failed to repeat the Quranic text by heart when prompted to," his father said.

The children, those parents say, hate going to school. They are often absent due to the continued bullying by both teachers and other children.

'Don't socialise with them'

Another account of bullying was replicated in Mustapha Kamal Primary School in the village of Delga, near the city of Dayr Mawas, Minya, 320km south of Cairo.

Nine-year-old Kyrellos Shafiq was given a 'zero' for his homework and told, "Your handwriting is rubbish." The boy's father explained: "The teacher made the other students pin down my son as he gave him the bastinado, caning him on his bare feet. It seems only Christians are given this punishment. They're 12 out of 42 in my son's class."

In another case, an Islamic studies teacher in el-Zeira Primary School, in Abu-Teig, Assiut, reportedly waited until the Christian pupils had left to attend their separate lesson

before telling the others to have nothing to do with them. Ten-year-old Maccar Aziz was later told by a Muslim friend that the teacher had "told the Muslim children in class not to socialise with their Christian colleagues. He said they [Christians] were infidels whom our religion demands we have nothing to do with."

What goes on in the classroom is not detached from the wider atmosphere Christians face in a State that has repeatedly enshrined Islam as its official religion and Sharia as the source of its legislation, despite officially upholding freedom of belief. Since the 1970s Gulf oil-boom, many expatriates across the Middle East have returned home with a renewed zeal for "the faith", having been told it was their duty to revive it in all quarters.

Unlike in countries such as Syria and Iraq, where Christians have been forced to flee en masse or face the full force of the Islamic State, Egypt's Copts have been able to live within a margin of tolerance, with only occasional attacks and official infringements.

Some people now see this margin tightening. They fear that Egypt's uneasy co-existence could shatter at any moment, mindful of the dozens of churches and Coptic properties that were attacked in the summer of 2013. Supporters of the former Islamist President Mohamed Morsi carried out the attacks after he was ousted following widespread protests.

Although some Copts respond to this pressure by emigrating to the West, others have no desire to abandon their homeland. Asked whether he thought of leaving, Ayman Ibrahim, 40, a Coptic sports teacher from Assiut in Upper Egypt, replied: "This is our home, I feel such a link to this land. It's where I have my family and my childhood friends. How can I replace that?"

Only time will tell whether Kyrellos, Abanob and Viola share his loyalty to their country after experiencing hostility from its teachers at such a young age.

The Coptic students sentenced for allegedly insulting Islam flee to Switzerland

Agenzia Fides (09.09.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2cqQ2oM> - The four Coptic students sentenced to five years in prison in February for allegedly insulting Islam in a video flee to Switzerland, where they will seek asylum.

The Egyptian Ministry of Justice had promised to reconsider the court case (see Fides 08/03/2016), but then there had been no positive developments.

The boys left Egypt in April, moving to Turkey, where they lived in hiding for five months. In early September - according to what was reported by one of them to Morning Star News - the boys, with the help of organizations engaged in the defense of human rights, obtained a special humanitarian visa and reached Switzerland.

"We are grateful to the Swiss authorities and our partners who helped us to reach Switzerland", said Daniel Hoffman, executive director of Middle East Concern, one of the agencies involved in the expatriation of the four boys. As reported by Hoffman, Switzerland was "the first and only country" to respond positively to the request - also presented to other nations - to accommodate the boys and prevent them from having to end up in Egyptian prisons.

Egypt's parliament passes controversial law on church building and renovation

CSW (07.09.2016) - On 30 August, Egypt's Parliament approved a controversial new law governing the building and renovation of churches by a two-thirds majority, following four hours of at times impassioned debate.

Although the new law fulfils a constitutional commitment to pass legislation regulating the sensitive issue of church construction and renovation, it has been criticised by a number of Coptic MPs, who claim it is "restrictive" and was "imposed on Christians".

Previously, permission for building a new church could only be granted through presidential decree, which occurred once every year or every other year. Under the new law applications will be submitted to and decided by the relevant provincial governor.

During the debate on the new legislation, criticism was particularly levelled at vague provisions stipulating that the size of any new church must be in proportion with the number of Christians in the surrounding neighbourhood and that population growth must also be taken into account. Another ambiguous stipulation requires provincial governors to consider "the preservation of security and public order" when deciding on an application.

While some Coptic MPs, such as Ms Margaret Azer, welcomed the new legislation as a "progressive step, even though it still includes some negative points", others, such as Mr Emad Gad, said it was "restrictive and will still make it hard for Christians to build churches easily". He also told the Al-Shorouk newspaper that the government has not shown any will to eradicate sectarian tensions in the country.

Bishoy Armia Boulos (Mohammed Hegazy) returns to Islam

Church in Chains (05.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bIPs4m> - On 30 July, following two and a half year's unlawful detention, Christian convert Bishoy Armia Boulos (34) posted a video on YouTube announcing that he had returned to Islam. He has been released from prison into the custody of his parents.

The video was posted on a newly-created YouTube channel under the name Mohammed Hegazy (his original Muslim name). Bishoy/Mohammed's lawyer, Karam Ghobrial, stated that he believed that Bishoy/Mohammed made the video which included the Shahadah (the Islamic confession of faith) because he was a terrified and broken man. He noted that Bishoy/Mohammed seemed stilted in the video, and that the statement he gave seemed scripted. "I personally think that he recorded this video to get out," said the lawyer, who had worked tirelessly to secure his freedom.

In the two and a half minute long video, Bishoy/Mohammed said he wouldn't discuss his return to Islam or speak to the media again. "I went through an experience with all its good and bad and all that is in it, but it was an experience... But praise be to God who strengthens me in Islam. I am not coming today to talk about specific things, because it was a personal thing between a person and God. But I am coming today because I hurt a lot of people in my family and my friends and caused them a lot of problems." He apologised to family members, who had threatened to kill him after he became a Christian.

The fact that Bishoy/Mohammed declared that he wasn't speaking under duress but at the same time would no longer speak to media has aroused concern among human rights activists in Egypt that he may have been coerced or threatened to make the statement.

Efforts to secure release

Bishoy/Mohammed was finally released on bail on 23 July after spending more than three weeks being transferred from prison to prison across Egypt, under the direct orders of the Ministry of Interior (MOI), according to Kharam Ghobrial, his lawyer during his imprisonment. It is unclear if he still faces charges.

Since the end of June when a judge ordered his release, security agents from the MOI transferred Bishoy/Mohammed to at least four different prisons or police holding cells no less than six times with no hope of ever being released, and without giving any reason why he was being detained. With each transfer, Bishoy/Mohammed became increasingly suicidal. The last time Mr Ghobrial saw him, he was at a breaking point, the lawyer said. "It broke my heart to see him crying at the police station that day. I couldn't do anything to help him. He'd lost hope in life and was thinking about suicide."

Bishoy/Mohammed, who is aged 34, was released on condition that he return to live with his parents, who were the first people to turn him in to the government for leaving Islam and who have made no secret about their desire to see him dead for converting. At the time, Mr Ghobrial said, "I feel like [releasing him to his parents] would be the end of Bishoy/Mohammed. Because Port Said is a small city, and it isn't only his parents who live there but his whole extended family. Port Said is where he converted to Christianity. He will be easy to recognise and easy to kill. I don't understand the police's insistence that he live with his parents. It's basically like saying, 'Here he is - kill him,' and then handing him over on a silver platter."

There has been no news about Bishoy/Mohammed's wife, Christine, and the couple's two children who took refuge in Europe some years ago.

Although the Egyptian constitution guarantees freedom of expression and belief, security agents from the Ministry of the Interior routinely harass and arrest converts who are suspected of leaving Islam.

In June, during Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, Al-Azhar Mosque's Grand Imam Ahmed el-Tayyib, arguably the most respected Islamic scholar in the world, said during a daily TV programme that leaving Islam was "treason" and that apostates should be executed.

"The penalty for an open apostate, departing from the community, is well stipulated in Sharia," Imam El-Tayyib said. "An apostate must be pressed upon to repent within a variable period of time or be killed."

Background

Mohammed Hegazy became a Christian in 1998. He was arrested several times and was tortured, but refused to recant his faith. He became well known in Egypt as the first citizen to attempt to change the religious identity on his ID card from Muslim to Christian, in a case begun in 2007. Egyptian citizens aged 16 or older must carry an ID card, which is necessary to open a bank account, enrol children in school or start a business, among other activities. In January 2008, the Supreme Administrative Court ruled against Bishoy. In 2009 a group of Islamists filed a charge of defaming Islam ("blasphemy") against him, based on the accusation that leaving Islam casts the religion into ill repute.

Bishoy/Mohammed worked as a Christian journalist and had been in prison since December 2013 when he was arrested while documenting the persecution of Christians in Upper Egypt. He should have been released in December 2014 after serving a one-year sentence but remained in prison at the insistence of state security intelligence officials. It is known that he was beaten and tortured in prison and that he was pressurised to recant his Christian faith.

Egyptian Christian and Muslim neighbours put out Luxor church fire together

Barnabas Fund (21.07.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2beJFqQ> - In the early hours of Saturday (16 July), flames and smoke engulfed the only church building in the Egyptian village of Madamoud, east of Luxor. Before the firefighters arrived, in a spirit of cooperation unusual in Egypt (where many churches have been destroyed by Islamists), Muslim and Christian villagers worked together to extinguish the blaze. Despite their efforts the whole interior of the building was destroyed. An investigation into the cause of the fire is ongoing, but Egyptian human rights groups have already highlighted similarities between the fire in Madamoud and a suspected arson attack on a church in Luxor which occurred in April of this year.

The current church building in Madamoud was constructed in 1980 with funds raised by the local Christian community and also serves as a place of worship for believers in surrounding villages without church buildings.

Seven weeks see a dozen incidents against Egypt's Copts

World Watch Monitor (20.07.2016) - Since May 2016, Egypt's Christians have suffered multiple attacks.

Reflecting what most Copts see as the country turning a blind eye to increased violence against its Christian minority, the Coptic Church's Bishop Makarius tweeted on 17 July "reminding" president Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi that Copts "are Egyptian citizens", and that his diocese of Minya "falls within the country's jurisdiction".

On 7 July, the bishop said [Egypt was "diseased" with discrimination](#). Home to nearly double the national average of 10% of Christians, Makarius's diocese of Minya and Abu-Qurqas has seen a number of attacks.

- **17 July:** [One Christian was killed and three others were injured in an assault at a Coptic priest's](#) family home in the village of Tahna el-Gabal, Minya (250km south of Cairo). Reports by mainstream Egyptian media said the incident was due to a "scuffle" involving Muslims and Christians, but sources closely following the incident said it was a "deliberate attack on the priest" who was thought to be trying to open up a church building authorities had refused to license.
- **16 July:** Christians woke up to find a fire raging at 3am inside the village church in Madamoud, Luxor (650km south of Cairo). According to the local priest the rescue services came one hour later, after fire had already gutted the church. Fr. Paulos Atta told World Watch Monitor he could easily rule out the presence of any physical cause to the fire inside the church, which lies in an area where Christians mainly live. An investigation into the incident is still pending.
- **15 July:** five homes belonging to Copts were looted and torched in a village off Abu-Qurqas, Minya, after it was rumoured that a building - home to a church-run nursery - was being turned into a church.

- **9 July:** In Zagazig (83km northeast of Cairo), two women were attacked as they were leaving the town's Anba Karas Church. Ahmed Adel Kamel, a second-year pharmaceutical student stabbed both women in the neck. The two Christians were rushed to hospital in a critical condition, while the young man was arrested. WWM learnt from the husband of one of the victims that the perpetrator twice admitted to police that he was carrying out the attack "following the Islamic State's instructions".
- **5 July:** The body of Magdi Attiya Gabriel, 33, a pharmacist, was found beheaded and stabbed nine times in a house opposite his own in the Delta town of Tanta (93km north of Cairo). The house where Gabriel was murdered was occupied by a Salafist (Islamically puritanical) neighbour and another man. Gabriel was first called over the road to give his medical advice. Outside his callers' front door he was engaged in a conversation for half an hour, then taken inside, as neighbours began hearing cries for help. The suspect attackers were seen fleeing with their clothes stained in blood while Gabriel's body was found inside. No apparent reason was given for the attack.
- **2 July:** a [priest's daughter narrowly escaped being slaughtered](#) outside the bishopric of Sohag (500km south of Cairo). Lucia Angaelos Murad, 14, was suddenly grabbed by her hair from behind while her attacker tried to slit her throat. Missing her vital artery, the attacker stabbed her instead in the neck and upper shoulder when church youths hurried to her rescue. Mohamed Taha, described as wearing wide fitting clothes and wielding a knife, was arrested, and later remanded in a psychiatric ward for observation after his family claimed he was insane.
- **30 June:** [Fr. Raphael Moussa of St. George's Coptic Orthodox Church is killed in Arish](#), North Sinai in an attack claimed by "Islamic State" describing the priest as "waging war against Islam".
- **30 June:** Four homes belonging to four brothers were attacked at 1am [in a village off Samalout, Minya](#) (230km south of Cairo), after Ayoub Khallaf Fahmi was rumoured to be "setting up a church". All four homes were looted and torched. At the police station, Fahmi signed a pledge that he was setting up a residential property and not a church.
- **13 July:** World Watch Monitor has learnt that Ibrahim, one of the Fahmi brothers, was assaulted despite the presence of security forces stationed in the village after 30 June. Security forces released the injured Copt from the hands of four assailants, who remain at large despite earlier warrants for their arrest on charges of involvement in torching the brothers' homes. Ibrahim says his attackers were again allowed to go free to pressure him and his brothers to "reconcile", while threats were made against their sons to force them to withdraw their earlier complaints to the police. On 14 July, one such threat apparently materialised when a Copt girl, Rizka Malak, 18, was "held by hardliners" to intimidate the Copts into withdrawing their complaints against their Muslim attackers, said a Coptic bishop quoting Christians in the same village. Meanwhile, Ayoub Fahmi told WWM that he, his three brothers and all members of their four families remain huddled in a 30-square-metre tractor shack next to their gutted homes, deprived of necessities, including toilet facilities.
- **17 June:** After Friday Muslim prayers, more than 5,000 people, young and old, mobbed homes of Copts in a settlement off Alexandria after reports a Copt was turning his home into a church. [Ten Christian homes were looted](#), while the family of 46-year-old Naim Moussa, the man at the centre of the unconfirmed reports, faced police pressures to "reconcile" with their attackers.
- **29 May:** A baker, Romani Attef, 26, died of several stab wounds in a street in Shobra el-Kheima (north Cairo) in front of his wife. The assailant, Amr Ibrahim Abdelaziz, repeated as he was stabbing his victim that he was "doing this in

obedience to what Allah has decreed". He later claimed mental insanity, and was detained in a psychiatric ward.

Christian pharmacist stabbed, decapitated in attack during Ramadan

Barnabas Fund (07.07.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bvoJtq> - On Monday 4 July, Madgy Attia, a Christian pharmacist living in Tanta (65 miles/100 kilometres north of Cairo), was stabbed and then beheaded by attackers, said to be Muslims, who left his remains lying in one of the apartments in a block to which he had been delivering medicines. To date no arrests have been made. The murder of Magdy Attia is one of a string of attacks against Christians in Egypt that have taken place during the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan (6 June to 6 July).

Egyptian church minister murdered by Islamic State in northern Sinai for "fighting Islam"

Barnabas Fund (07.07.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bMMv1S> - On Saturday 30 June a minister in Egypt's northern Sinai was gunned down as he returned home following a church service. Raphail Moussa was shot four times in the head by multiple gunmen, according to police. Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility on social media for his murder, posting that "Islamic State soldiers were able to successfully target the priest Moussa Azmi, known as Rafael [sic], who fights Islam."

This is the second murder of a church leader in Al Arish by IS. The first was shot outside his church in July 2013 by Islamist militants in the wake of Mohammed Morsi being ousted as president.

Since the fall of President Mohammad Morsi in 2013, the Egyptian government has struggled to contain the rise of groups affiliated to IS in the northern Sinai, despite repeated military operations. Whilst the conflict has primarily been between IS factions and the Egyptian military, Christians have been targeted in attacks and kidnappings, and many have fled the region seeking safety elsewhere.

'House church' prompts Muslims to attack Christian homes in Alexandria

World Watch Monitor (28.06.2016) - Although the number of casualties may not cross the world-attention threshold, the story of what happened in al-Bayda-1, a settlement outside Alexandria, is indicative of a pattern faced by minority Christians in Egypt when failure of the rule of law and religious prejudice become the order of the day.

On Friday, 17 June, after the Muslim noon prayers, angry worshippers gathered outside the home of Naim Aziz Moussa, after word had spread that the local Christian was turning his house into a 'church'.

"More than 5,000 people, including young and old, men and women, mobbed my home. They were shouting: 'One way or another, we'll bring the church down to the ground'," he said.

Recent visits by a Coptic priest to Moussa's home had given locals reason to think a Christian place of worship was springing up in their midst. Apart from housing the family of six on the ground floor, the top two floors of the building were to discreetly serve as a place where Christians could gather, in the absence of any other place in the village they could use.

It has often proved legally impossible to issue church building permits in the country, a sore point of contention for Copts. Despite various attempts, the bid to pass legislation to remove various hurdles remains elusive.

Besides the 46-year-old farmer and his family, the village of al-Bayda-1 is home to some 80 Christian households. Situated on the Alexandria-Cairo Desert Road, the slum-like settlement falls within Amreyya, a district of Alexandria that is heavily influenced by fundamentalist Muslim Salafists, who, locals report, make no secret of their disdain for Christians.

The nearest church is over 5 kilometres away in another village - a considerable distance, given poor transport and an area where high-density population means people already live in close quarters.

Moussa, also known as Maurice, had in 2009 donated part of his building to the church.

Some widely circulated media, including Fox News, have reported that 80 homes were torched. However, World Watch Monitor, based on reports from local sources, learnt that at least two homes, including Moussa's, suffered extensive damages, while 10 Christian homes were looted.

'Infidels'

Building material, fittings and fixtures believed to have been gathered to make the "house church" were destroyed.

It's either us or you, infidels!

"No church will stand here in the village. It's either us or you, infidels!" Moussa recalled the angry mob as saying.

"The building was ransacked, including our home. My brother's nearby new flat was also destroyed," said Moussa, who, together with another of his brothers, was injured in the chaos.

In line with what has become an all too familiar pattern, nearby Christian homes were pelted with stones. "At least five Copts were injured. Women and children were caught in the panic," Moussa added.

Nearby church priest Fr. Karas was said to have narrowly escaped from the angry crowd, while his car was smashed.

'Islamic! Islamic!'

"They were crying out: 'Islamic! Islamic! We don't want churches in Amreyya!'" added Moussa.

The police were immediately at the scene, which Moussa said he thought was suspicious.

"It seemed all too convenient that the Amreyya Police Chief and other ranking officers happened to be doing their prayers this Friday at the twin al-Bayda-2 village merely 5

kilometres away," he said. "As the police arrived at the scene, angry Muslims were shouting, while their women were showing signs of jubilation that the police were there. They were shouting out in support of the police, while at the same time stressing their rejection of the church on Islamic grounds.

"The police chief could see me bleeding from my wounds. I complained to him about what happened to me. He said I deserved this, and more. Meanwhile our attackers carried the chief on their shoulders and cried out in support: 'People and police are one!'"

According to Sabri Shawki, another local Copt, the police took 19 Christians, himself included, in a van. "I thought they were taking us to the station. But they only whisked us outside the village and left us there," said Shawki.

"The police did nothing to protect the Christians. Right in their presence, more Christian properties were attacked. Fr. Karas's car was smashed yet again," added Moussa, saying a number of the attackers then joined the police chief for evening Muslim prayers right in front of the Christians' homes, while using loudspeakers.

The police eventually rounded up six Muslims and six Christians, including Moussa. One of the Copts detained, Harvey Fawzi, was an outsider who happened to be at the scene at the wrong time.

According to local sources, the six Muslims were shortly released in time for their evening breaking of the Ramadan fast, while the six Copts were kept for longer. At 10pm that night the Christians were charged with "building without permission" – an anomaly, says Moussa, as every building in the slum village is built without permission.

After midnight the Copts were released on bail after being also charged with "praying without permit".

'Praying without permit'

"When at the police station, I requested the officer to take me to hospital as my head was bleeding. I was kept till midnight, before being allowed to go to the hospital, where I was stitched," added Moussa.

Since 17 June, Moussa, together with his heavily pregnant wife, their four children, and his brother's family, cannot go back home.

"We're sleeping rough. The security forces are not allowing us to go back home, unless we opt for extrajudicial conciliation," he said. "The police tell me I can only go home if I agree to reconcile with my opponents."

Despite pressures to relinquish their legal rights, the Moussas are adamant.

"I stand for justice. We have suffered a lot. If the law means anything, I will have justice first," says Moussa, who says he is distraught that his attackers sit amicably with policemen right outside the home he cannot now go to.

The Moussas' wait for justice may be long.

"The Amreyya Police Chief tells me the law won't help me. He taunts me that my cousin cannot get his land back despite a legal ruling in his favour," Moussa said, referring to Hamdi Mekanoti, whose story World Watch Monitor covered last year.

Building new churches and re-modelling old ones is restricted in Egypt. Still, in numerous cases Christians have set up churches in the basements of their residential buildings, or through establishing NGOs and eventually using their premises for worship.

Al-Azhar: to leave Islam is 'treason'

World Watch Monitor (22.06.2016) - <http://bit.ly/28YobZI> - To convert away from Islam is "treason" that should carry the death penalty, according to Sunni Islam's topmost religious authority.

"The penalty for an open apostate, departing from the community, is well stipulated in Sharia," Al-Azhar's Grand Imam Ahmed el-Tayyib declared on Egypt television last week.

"An apostate must be pressed upon to repent within a variable period of time or be killed," el-Tayyib stated, reiterating Islam's traditional position during a 16 June episode of a daily TV program featuring him.

The 'Good Imam' is broadcast every day during the Muslim month of Ramadan, a time of fasting, intense worship and increased zeal across the Islamic world. Shown over Egypt's state TV, it is also broadcast by several private satellite channels across the Arab world and Muslim diaspora.

"[Preaching] apostasy stems from a hatred against Islam and a premeditated desire to work against it. As such it constitutes in my belief high treason and a departure from the community and what it holds sacred," the official portal of Al-Azhar quoted el-Tayyib as saying.

Started over a millennium ago as a centre of Shiite power, Cairo's Al-Azhar Mosque has since become renowned as "Sunni Islam's most prestigious university". Currently, it serves as a main ideological and logistical backer of worldwide Islamic missionary work.

'Blind at heart'

"The broad consensus of Islamic theology, including the Prominent Scholars of [Sunni Islam's] Four Schools, judge apostasy to be criminal," el-Tayyib said. "They are all in agreement that an apostate must be pressed upon to repent within a variable period of time or be killed.

"One is to employ dialogue and debate in the hope the apostate would repent, which in itself speaks for a measure of flexibility in that an apostate is not killed outright," el-Tayyib said, describing converts from Islam as "blind at heart" for leaving "the Religion of Original Nature".

In el-Tayyib's home country of Egypt, where Sharia is not fully implemented, converts to Christianity are not sentenced to death. Other charges are often levelled against them to keep them in jail for lengthy periods of time, as in the current case of Mohammed Hegazy, imprisoned since December 2013.

Liberal Muslim voices have found themselves cornered by Al-Azhar's professed role as guardian of orthodox Islam. Last January, a TV presenter and researcher, Islam el-Behery, was sentenced to a year in prison for arguing against canonical texts of Islam on a number of issues, including apostasy.

It is the second time this Ramadan that a statement by Egypt's religious establishment has caused widespread reaction among sectors of the Egyptian public, which is 90 percent Muslim.

Preceding the start of the Muslim fasting month, the country's fatwa issuing authority (Darul-Ifta) said on 6 June that to eat or drink in public during Ramadan "cannot be included within the realm of personal freedoms, but is a type of anarchy transgressing the sanctity of Islam".

Stressing that "in the Islamic world, apostates are not being strung from the gallows in public squares," the Grand Imam stated that the issue was being handled with "a flexible theology that emphasizes creativity of thinking based on Sharia's ethos."

The published statement by el-Tayyib concluded by blaming the West for "repelling people away from Islam," describing concerns over women issues, apostasy, and Jihad as "defamation of Islam and Muslims".

At least seven young Christian women in Egypt kidnapped and likely forcibly married and converted to Islam

Barnabas Fund (22.06.2016) - <http://bit.ly/29J2kb1> - In what is a long-running systemic problem across Egypt, at least seven young Christian women from Upper Egypt have been kidnapped by Muslims and almost certainly forcibly married and converted to Islam. As typically happens, the police have done little or nothing to try to find the women and return them to their Christian families.

On Sunday 27 March, 19-year-old Amal Shaky was kidnapped on her way to a class at Cairo University. After spending the night looking for her, Amal's family approached the police. Her father reports, "When I asked the officer to file a complaint of [the] kidnapping of my daughter, he said to me, 'Maybe you killed your daughter and threw away her body.'" The officer eventually registered the incident but refused to record it as a kidnapping, instead putting Amal down as missing.

It is not the first time Amal has been kidnapped. Five years ago she had been abducted by four men but on that occasion her family managed to secure her release. One of the four kidnapers was sentenced to seven years imprisonment, but he was never detained or sent to jail.

It is now more than 40 days since the family last saw Amal. "I don't know how long I should wait. Wait until they tell me that my daughter is killed or got married?" said her father.

In another case, 18-year-old Mary Wahib – who was kidnapped at gunpoint by four masked men from her home in the village of Bait Alaam on Sunday 1 May – appeared online three days later. In a video posted on Facebook, Mary says, "I bear witness that there is no god but Allah, I bear witness that Muhammad is his messenger." In the video Mary claims that she was not kidnapped and has decided to convert to Islam.

But her family is not convinced. "We are sure that Mary was kidnapped and forced to appear in this video. We urge the officials in the state to intervene and return Mary to us," said one of her cousins. Her family have held a demonstration outside the local police station appealing for the police to take action.

Barnabas Fund has often reported on the vulnerability of Christian teenagers and women, both single and married, not only in Egypt but also in Pakistan, where incidents of kidnap

by Muslims, followed by forcible marriage and conversion, are frequent. "Although these practices are illegal both in sharia and in the national laws of the two countries," notes Dr Patrick Sookhdeo in his book *Dawa*, "the authorities generally turn a blind eye to them and do little or nothing to intervene ... The attacks are often carefully planned and may involve drugging the girl or arranging to have a third person get to know and befriend her before the attack."

The number of such cases increased in Egypt following the "Arab Spring", and it was reported that over 500 Christian women and girls had been abducted in little more than two years since January 2011.

Bishop pleads for justice as attack on Copt grandmother 'stripped naked' stirs Egypt

World Watch Monitor (03.06.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1VZ3ktm> - A Coptic bishop has urged full recourse to law to punish those behind an attack in Minya, Upper Egypt, which saw the 70-year-old mother of a man rumoured to have had an affair with a Muslim woman stripped naked in public view.

She and another Coptic woman were at the very least injured, while five homes were also burned when angry villagers ran amok after the rumoured affair between Ashraf Attiya, a 31-year-old Coptic trader, and a married Muslim woman, Nagwa Ragab Fouad.

Fouad, already estranged from her husband, Nazir Ahmed, strongly denies the alleged affair, insisting Ahmed spread the rumour to be able to get a free divorce, denying her her legal rights.

Bishop Makarius of Minya (300km south of Cairo) this week reiterated his call to bring the attackers to justice, rejecting the practice of extrajudicial "conciliation meetings" that have long pressured Copts to give up legal rights.

"The law should take its course until the perpetrators are brought to justice," said Makarius of the attack in the village of al-Karam on Friday 20 May.

"Such issues have to be tackled head on. The root causes have to be exposed."

'I was completely stripped'

Threats against Copts, including the Attiya household, became apparent from 18 May. When the priest of a nearby village raised the issue with the authorities, he was given false assurances.

Soad Thabet, the alleged lover's 70-year-old mother, told a local TV chat show: "On Friday [20 May], sometime in the evening, our home was stormed. They beat my husband severely. When I started screaming, they dragged me out into the street.

"They repeatedly beat me and stripped me of all my clothes. They left me as naked as the day I was born.

"They were heavily armed, no-one dared approach me to help."

Thabet and her husband were forced to leave the village, home to around 1,000 Christians among 30,000 Muslims, a place without a single church to serve the community.

Faced with specific threats, her son, Ashraf, had a week earlier fled the village, together with his wife and four daughters.

For a woman from an especially conservative rural culture, the trauma was particularly severe.

"I wish they had only beaten me, no matter how hard, but not stripped me entirely naked as they did," said Thabet on TV.

A worse fate was averted by a Muslim neighbour's act of courage.

Ramadan Kamal, living across from the Attiyas, risked his safety to take her into his home.

World Watch Monitor learnt that Thabet was whisked upstairs, where she was moved across adjoining rooftops to a Christian man's home, thus averting a full parade, naked, around the village streets.

Police response

Fearing violence due to the brewing rumour, Thabet had reported the threats to the police a day earlier (Thursday).

The police did not move. "Not a single policeman or guard was posted," said Thabet on Dream TV's 'More Talk' show.

Again on the morning of Friday 20 May, the family approached the police for help, stating they were in clear danger after their home had been ransacked the night before, in their absence.

"The police chased us out of the police station. They said we were troublemakers," said the elderly woman.

Thabet was stripped naked later on Friday evening. She went back to the police station the same night.

"The complaint I filed earlier on Thursday was not found. The police then claimed I never reported anything," she said.

By the end of the day tens of thousands of pounds' worth of Christian property had been lost, but even greater damage had been done to the Christians' morale.

Thabet blames jealousy of the family's relative wealth as the reason behind the "adultery" rumour.

Meanwhile, Nagwa Ragab Fouad, estranged wife of the man accused of whipping up the village against Ashraf's family, has denied any sexual relationship with the Christian.

"Before this whole thing was trumped up, I'd asked for a divorce. He [Ahmed] has raised this whole thing up in order to deny me all legal rights," said Fouad on national TV. "God is my witness, there is nothing at all between me and Ashraf."

She added that her husband implicated Ashraf in an alleged affair with her because both he and Ashraf were business partners and had fallen out.

After the assault on Thabet, Fouad went to the police and reported her husband.

'Under the carpet'

The incident had whipped up emotions on social media before it eventually found its way to mainstream world attention. Coptic Pope Tawadros II echoed the call for "law to be enforced before conciliation can take place".

Egypt President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi condemned what he termed an "offense against an Egyptian woman", but failed to identify the victim as Christian. He vowed wrongdoers will be held accountable "no matter how numerous".

Currently 10 suspects remain in jail, pending charges. Seven have been released. Among those still detained is Ahmed.

Despite repeated calls, so far no-one has been sacked from the police or local government.

Over the years, Copts have been subjected to repeated mob attacks. Despite the predictable nature of such attacks, remedies – if any come – are often "too little, too late".

Among those are "conciliatory meetings", described by Bishop Makarius as "highly detrimental" to Coptic rights. Such settlement outside the law corners the victims into accepting "humiliating terms", he said.

"Often the spectre of 'consequences', or 'dangers' to our children and our businesses, is raised in order to force us to such settlements," said Makarius in an interview with Coptic CTV channel late last month.

Meanwhile, liberal Egyptian journalist Ibrahim Issa is not upbeat about the possibilities of change.

"Rather than dealing with the issue transparently, everyone is called upon to stay silent," says Issa, a Muslim.

"The modus operandi is such that were a fire raging next door, you'd be urged not to raise the alarm," he added, on a popular private TV show. "Rather, it's said to be no fire, but someone lighting candles to celebrate a birthday party! It's a state of denial."

'Ethos of forgiveness'

Bishop Angaelos of the UK Coptic Orthodox Church added his voice to that of his fellow Bishop in Minya:

"Days after having been stripped and dragged through the streets of her village in the most undignified and inhumane of ways, the gracious and forgiving response of Soad Thabet ... is both courageous and inspiring.

"The ethos of the Coptic Christian community in Egypt has always been one of forgiveness, as was particularly evident in its peaceful and reconciliatory response to the burning of over one hundred churches and places of ministry in August 2013, and following the brutal execution of 21 Coptic Christians in Libya last year. Having said that, there is currently a rejection of conventional 'reconciliation meetings' based on the fact that they have historically been used as a cosmetic short-term solution, without addressing root causes or preventing the recurrence of similar incidents. Despite an ongoing commitment to genuine reconciliation efforts, there is an immediate and pressing need for tangible solutions, as superficial measures that aim to pacify will by no means have a lasting effect, and can never lead to true reconciliation and social cohesion.

"It is indeed shameful that such mob crimes can be perpetrated against innocent communities or individuals, of whatever faith or ethnicity, and especially as a result of slanderous and unsubstantiated allegations; and that an elderly woman could be so publicly and indecently humiliated. What is also unacceptable is the utter disinterest (at best) and/or complicit and criminal negligence (at worst) with which the local security services conducted themselves, and the Minya Governor's initial denial that these crimes actually occurred.

"In light of this, President Sisi has expressed a need for fair and transparent investigation, and amidst allegations that those apprehended for these crimes have been released on bail, the hope is that measures to safeguard every Egyptian citizen, irrespective of his or her chosen faith or belief, will indeed be effectively implemented.

"As I commented last week, Egypt is at a formative stage of its contemporary history, which requires a robust system of law and order that underpins an ethos of equal citizenship and accountability. Any such steps taken at the national level, however, are severely hampered and undermined by these recurring failures at the local level.

"Little can possibly be done to compensate the unprovoked injustice suffered by an innocent elderly mother in rural Egypt, but we continue to pray for peace and for the hearts and minds of the perpetrators to be changed, paving the way for true reconciliation".

Elderly woman assaulted, homes destroyed in sectarian violence

CSW (27.05.2016) - Seven Coptic families lost their homes and an elderly woman was stripped and beaten during an outbreak of sectarian violence in Upper Egypt on 20 May, according to Church sources.

Violence erupted in Al-Karm Village, El-Minya Province, following rumours of an alleged relationship between a local Christian man and a Muslim woman. The man fled the village after facing significant harassment and his family lodged a complaint at Abu Kourkas Police Station on 19 May after receiving threats indicating they would be attacked the next day.

At approximately 8pm on 20 May around 300 armed men began attacking Christians in the village, looting and setting fire to seven homes and causing an estimated LE350,000 (around \$39,400) worth of damage, according to a statement issued on 25 May by His Grace Bishop Makarios, General Bishop of the Diocese of Minya.

During the attack, the man's elderly mother was stripped naked and dragged into the street where she was beaten while her home was razed to the ground. Some reports indicate the beating only stopped when she managed to roll under a nearby vehicle, and another woman gave her clothing with which to cover herself. The police reportedly arrived at scene around 10pm and arrested six men. In his statement the Bishop explained that the lady was only able to report her own ordeal to the police five days later, as she initially found it too difficult to 'swallow the humiliation'.

As news emerged of the attack, His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, issued a statement urging restraint and coexistence, adding that he is following up the case with security and state officials, who had given assurances of bringing the perpetrators justice. President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi issued a statement ordering officials to hold the perpetrators to account, to preserve public order and to

protect citizens and their property. He also instructed the governor of Minya Province to coordinate with the armed forces to reconstruct the damaged property within a month at the state's expense. Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam's foremost religious institution, also denounced the attacks and announced that members of Beit al-A'ila (House of the Egyptian Family), an interfaith initiative to promote tolerance and militate against sectarianism, would be visiting the area.

Commenting on Bishop Makarios' statement and recent incidents, His Grace Bishop Angaelos, General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom said: "It is indeed shameful that such mob crimes can be perpetrated against innocent communities at all, of whatever faith or ethnicity, and especially as a result of slanderous and unsubstantiated rumours; and that an elderly mother could be so publicly and indecently humiliated. What is also unacceptable is the utter disinterest (at best) and/or complicit and criminal negligence (at worst) with which the local security services conducted themselves, and the Minya Governor's denial that these crimes occurred. Egypt is at a formative stage of its contemporary history which requires a robust system of law and order that underpins an ethos of equal citizenship and accountability. Any such steps taken at the national level are severely hampered and undermined by these recurring failures at the local level."

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said: "We are deeply concerned to hear of the violence in Upper Egypt and are particularly appalled by the attack on a vulnerable elderly woman. Our hearts are with her and we pray for her speedy recovery from this deeply traumatic experience. For men to launch such a brutal and reprehensible attack on a defenceless senior citizen is cowardly, inexcusable, and far more dishonouring of the character of the perpetrators than of the victim. While the responses of President Sisi and Al-Azhar are deeply gratifying and encouraging, it is vital for local authorities to be held to account from now onwards for failing to provide adequate and timely protection to vulnerable communities, in order to ensure a definitive end to the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of sectarian violence."

Muslim mob torches Christian homes

Seven Christian homes have been destroyed in Egypt after rumours that a Christian man was having an affair with a Muslim woman.

By Antony Bushfield

Premier (26.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1sRzYC4> - A mob set fire to the houses after stripping the mother of the Christian man and leaving her naked in the village.

The man accused of adultery fled the village, which is just south of the capital Cairo.

The local Coptic Church said police took two hours to arrive at the scene and had ignored warnings about an attack the day before.

Cleric Anba Makarios is quoted by AP as saying: "No one did anything and the police took no pre-emptive or security measures in anticipation of the attacks."

The mob of Muslims had "ample time" to destroy the Christian homes, he said, adding that Christians will be made to apologise and accept "humiliating" conditions.

General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom, Bishop Angaelos, told Premier's News Hour the police response time was "utterly unacceptable".

"The problem is when security services are warned and are called to help and stand idly by when people are treated like this.

"People are going to feel like they are going to need to take things into their own hands."

Christians in Egypt regularly come under attack. Earlier this month a campaigner defending the rights of Coptic Christians was arrested.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide said plainclothes police officers arrested Mina Thabet, from the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms (ECRF), in the middle of the night.

Mina Thabet is the Minority Rights Program Director for ECRF and was charged with belonging to a terrorist group, inciting violence and public assembly, spreading fabricated information for terrorist purposes, inciting attacks on police stations, and possession of leaflets undermining national security and the ruling regime.

He remains in detention.

Copt teenager kidnapped for ransom in Upper Egypt

Ongoing 'phenomenon' targets hundreds of Egyptian Christians

World Watch Monitor (21.04.2016) - <http://bit.ly/23VgI70> -

The News

Earlier this month, a young Christian boy was kidnapped in Upper Egypt, before being released 12 days later after the payment of a hefty ransom.

Anthonium Farag, 13, was snatched outside his school early in the morning on April 5, in the village of Mansheyyit Manbal, off Matay (230 km south of Cairo). His kidnappers released a Muslim child after identifying his religion by his name, but sped away with the Christian boy.

The latest case is not isolated. According to the Coalition of Coptic Egypt (CCE), a Coptic advocacy group, the Upper Egyptian province of Qena alone saw no less than 72 cases of kidnappings, extortion and related violence against Copts in the period from 2011 to 2014, the most recent figures it has. Those targeted for kidnapping ranged from children to the elderly.

How the kidnapping happened

"At 06:35 a grey Kia, plate number 43789, stopped in the vicinity of the school and my shop," said a local shop-keeper, who, conscious of his own safety, did not wish to be named.

One of four individuals in the car walked up to me, claiming they were looking for black market fuel. I said I couldn't help them with that. As soon as he had left, I heard noise outside the school, and shots were fired in the air by one of the four in the car. They soon sped away after they had bundled Anthonium into their car," he told World Watch Monitor.

Mansheyyit Manbal is a predominantly Christian town of 12,000 inhabitants. Many of the inhabitants have relatives working overseas, hence the impression among nearby villages that it is a 'rich' Christian town.

"My son, Kyrellos, was standing with both fellow pupils Anthonius and Mohamed when one of the kidnappers approached them," a Christian parent, Eid Yonan, said.

"[The kidnapper] inquired about their names. They let go of Mohamed, but gripped hold of Kyrellos and Anthonius." Both names are clearly identifiable as Christian.

"My son managed to escape, while other boys started screaming. One of the kidnappers shot rounds in the air to disperse the crowd, as the others quickly pushed Anthonius into the car and fled," added Yonan.

Shortly after, the kidnapped boy's father, Nawwar Farag, alerted the police about what happened at the school, which serves students from the town beside other students from nearby villages.

Three days after the kidnapping, Farag received a call demanding a ransom of two million Egyptian Pounds (EGP) - over 225,000 USD - in return for his son. Farag had little trust in police assurances that they had the kidnappers' phone tapped.

Police are not there. They see no evil, they hear no evil

"The police won't help you,' the abductors said when they called again April 12," Farag recalled. He agreed with the kidnappers on a sum of 300,000 EGP (\$34,000 US) - over 300 times an agricultural worker's monthly wages - which was all he as a poor farmer could raise, relying on a collection from Christians who earned more.

The drop-off arrangement went as planned on April 17, and soon after Anthonius was found, having made his way to a nearby village after being left on a deserted road.

"I was kept in a dark room, with my blindfold removed only when they offered me something to eat," Anthonius told World Watch Monitor, recalling his ordeal, which included beatings and questionings about his father's financial situation.

Meanwhile, the town church was earnestly praying, while other inhabitants demonstrated, and parents stopped sending their children to school.

Background

Anthonius's kidnapping follows numerous cases of Copts targeted for extortion, with rescue efforts often hampered by police inadequacies or unwillingness.

"For years the Copts of Nag Hamadi [in Qena] have been pleading for help against kidnappings, but no one seems to care," said Nahed Cherubim, a local CCE coordinator, referring to the Upper Egyptian town whose cathedral was attacked on the eve of Coptic Christmas 2010, resulting in nine deaths.

"Since the 25th January revolution (which ousted former president Mubarak in 2011), kidnappings have become more common in Upper Egypt, where relatively more Christians live... Families pay anywhere from EGP 250,000 to seven million to free their loved ones."

Minya (250 km south of Cairo) is another province that has in recent years gained notoriety for the large number of Copts snatched for ransom.

Amir Gamal, a Christian air force conscript from Beni Mazar, Minya, was set free on March 4, 2016, after his family paid EGP 140,000 (over \$15,000 US) to redeem him.

Amir B.M., a child of five, was released by his kidnappers in October 2015, after the payment of EGP 45,000, reported Egyptian newspaper Veto.

The child, likewise a Christian, was reported kidnapped and returned, to the Samalot police, in Minya.

Mina Thabet, a Minya equality activist decried the resurgence in kidnappings, describing them as a "clear drain on the Christians' financial resources."

A phenomenon?

Ishak Ibrahim, a researcher at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, insists the kidnappings are a 'phenomenon', blaming the lack of security for the increase in incidents.

In a phone call with the Egyptian satellite channel ONTV, he said that the kidnapping of Copts and the attacks against their possessions has increased greatly since the June 30, 2013 mass protests which ousted the Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi.

Ibrahim refuses to describe these attacks as individual incidents.

"After a brief lull, kidnappings are back in force. The cases are to the tune of a case each week, or two weeks, in some places of Upper Egypt. Most victims are Copts," Ibrahim told World Watch Monitor.

What do you expect us to do? Fend for yourselves

Ehab Karam, a dentist, was killed on 23 September 2014 while on his way home in Asyut City (390 km south of Cairo) from his private clinic in nearby Badari.

According to Christian website "Light and Dark," his wife said the couple had earlier repeatedly informed the police about the threats against her husband, for refusing to pay protection money.

"What do you expect us (police) to do? Fend for yourselves," was what she and other relatives were told, despite filing several complaints.

Earlier, in 2014, Egyptian newspaper al-Fagr claimed a 'gang' had imposed 'protection money' on close to 500 Coptic families in the villages of Asyut, listing names of victims and sums of money paid.

The paper said those refusing to pay had been told they "would either be killed, kidnapped, or forced to stay indoors."

Al-Mogaz, a mainstream Egyptian media outlet, noted the targeting of Christians when reporting the arrest of members of a 'gang' on March 7, 2015. This 'gang' appears to have been centred on the town Sahel Selim in Asyut, Upper Egypt (400 km south of Cairo).

However, the targeting was portrayed more through the prism of criminality than as a religious hate crime.

"Security authorities are aware of such incidents, but they don't seem to do much," said local pastor Kameel Masoud of Sahel Selim Evangelical church at the time of the arrests.

Emad Lotfi, a local Copt, was also quoted as saying "We have to pay protection money-- jizya, the criminals and extremists call it -- or suffer increasingly from kidnappings and extortion."

"It's almost an Islamic mini-state where we live, reminiscent of historic persecutions", he said.

The Damians' case

Emad and Medhat Damian, cousins, were among Christians pressured to pay hefty sums of money to a particular person in the same town of Sahel Selim,

Egyptian satellite channel ONTV's 'Manchette' talkshow interviewed their relative, Essam on Aug 24, 2014, who said:

"My brothers Emad and Medhat didn't submit to the demand for payment. After they reported the extortion by Ashraf Hillaka (the alleged extortioner) the police told them not to worry and not to pay.

"Next day, Ashraf calls them and again demands the money. Emad again refuses and reports this as well to a senior local police officer (name and rank stated), who again assures him.

"Ashraf arrives approximately 45 minutes later and is furious, having been informed by the police that they had reported him. He came and killed both my brothers right in their bedroom in the home where they were staying. He killed them both 'so that people will know and fear,' he said....

"The police didn't even come to collect the dead bodies."

"Twenty days later, with the authorities doing nothing, the demand (on other Christians) rises steeply from EGP 10,000 to a million. More than 250 victims had to pay sums ranging from EGP 50,000 to 600,000 each, according to ability. Some are (well-to-do) doctors, others are poor people," Essam stated on the widely watched Egyptian private channel.

"Police are not there. They see no evil, they hear no evil."

"The culprit is known by name. Officers know him," he said speaking of the double murder, which had happened almost a year before the TV appearance, on 10 September 2013.

Other cases in NE Egypt

Targeted violence against Copts has also occurred elsewhere in the country.

In a two-year period to July 2015, CCE stated that "127 Coptic families were forced to leave Rafah, Sheikh Zuweid and al-Arish after a rash of attacks" plaguing the Egyptian north-eastern Sinai Peninsula where an apparent Islamist insurgency has been taking place.

"Christian homes were singled out, with threats of slaughter against kidnapped victims," al-Masry al-Youm quoted CCE as saying.

Egypt: 'suicide' claim for third Christian conscript in nine months

World Watch Monitor (08.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1WKIcFO> - Another Egyptian Christian conscript has died in suspicious circumstances.

Michael Gamal, 22, was due to finish his two-year compulsory military service this May, when his family heard the shock news of his 'suicide'.

Last time his family heard from him was Feb 15. "As often, we talked over the phone. Michael was in good spirits. He was jesting and joking. He had a couple of months to go before his service was over," said Osama, Gamal's brother.

But the next several hours took an unexpected turn.

"When I called the next day, Michael, unusually, didn't respond."

Later that night a fellow draftee made a call from Gamal's phone. "I was told my brother was seriously injured. I couldn't believe it!" added Osama.

Hurriedly making their way to Shebeen el-Kom (76 km north of Cairo), where Gamal was posted, members of the family were informed by the military police that their son "had committed suicide".

At the hospital, an initial coroner report stated the cause of death as a "gunshot to the upper chest from close range". The body bore trauma marks to the forehead and right temple, they said

Perhaps more suspicious was, according to the family, repeated attempts by army officials to discourage an autopsy.

"Three members from the military police asked us who last called Gamal. They claimed we argued with him on the phone. This is flat out false! They said that he shot himself after he finished his call with us!" said Alaa Gamal, a second brother.

"The military wanted to bury the body before the rest of the family made their way from Asyut, 6 hours drive north to Shebeen. They tried to persuade me not to bring the family," said Osama Gamal.

"There were no hospital admission papers, despite the claim that Michael had still been alive when brought to the hospital. Later, a lieutenant from Michael's unit, Lt. Mohamed Medhat, tried to persuade us to immediately bury the body. He even said he'd fly the body on a military chopper and speed up all the necessary paper work" added Gamal.

In absence of an investigation, and before the body had left the hospital (Feb. 17), the military authorities were ready with a written report stating Michael "had shot himself dead".

Yet the family has strong grounds to discredit this claim.

"Michael told us that in his last post, over the past few months, he was "support personnel", so he neither carried on-duty nor was he issued any firearms. He couldn't have had access to a weapon to allegedly shoot himself with," said the older brother.

"How can he pull the trigger of a long rifle on himself?"

Gamal's mysterious death mirrors the case of Bishoy Kamel, another Copt conscript whose suspicious death last November was also reported as 'suicide'.

This takes the tally of Christian conscript deaths in either the Egyptian army or police to four since June 2015, and seven known cases over a decade. The cases were predominantly attributed to suicide.

Much to the families' anguish, claims of religious bullying were never properly investigated by the authorities.

"While in his last unit, Michael complained of ill-treatment by fellow soldiers and some officers" said Fr. Hydra Garas, who had been in close touch with him.

The family tellingly recall how Michael told them two months ago that an officer beat his back with a stick, leaving marks imprinted on the back of his under vest.

Yet during his last time off (29 Jan- 6 Feb) he seemed to have put the incident behind him.

"Last time I saw him, he was happy. He said 'Father, it's almost over!' " said Fr. Garas, referring to the near conclusion of Gamal's draft service, due on May 25.

Blasphemy trials on the rise in Egypt

Al Monitor (01.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1TSBNJz> - On Jan. 26, an Egyptian court sentenced journalist Fatima Naaot to three years in jail and a fine of 20,000 Egyptian pounds (\$2,500) for "defaming religions." The judgment reflected a "return to hisbah lawsuits, which are a threat to freedom of opinion, expression, thought, belief and human rights," said a Jan. 27 statement by the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights. Hisbah — meaning "accountability" — is an Islamic doctrine involving the ruler or government's duty to promote what is right and prevent wrong.

Naaot was accused of contempt for Islam and mocking the Islamic al-Adhiya (sacrifices) ritual. She had described the annual Islamic holiday of sacrifice — Eid al-Adha — in an October 2014 Facebook post as "a massacre committed because of the startling nightmare one of the righteous ones had about his son," in a reference to the story of Abraham in the Quran.

Mahmoud Othman, a legal scholar at the Institution of Freedom of Thought and Expression, said hisbah lawsuits are based on Article 3 of the Code of Procedure, which allows anyone to file a lawsuit against any creative work by an artist, writer or public figure as long as the plaintiff has an interest in it. Also, the lawsuit must be aimed at avoiding imminent damage or at documenting evidence. Such lawsuits are submitted to the public prosecutor, who determines their merit.

Othman told Al-Monitor that hisbah lawsuits violate the Egyptian Constitution, which says, "Freedom of thought and opinion is guaranteed. Every person has the right to express his opinion verbally, in writing, through imagery, or by any other means of expression and publication." The constitution also states, "Freedom of artistic and literary creativity is guaranteed. The state shall encourage arts and literature, sponsor creative artists and writers, and protect their productions. ... No lawsuit may be initiated or filed to stop or confiscate any artistic, literary or intellectual work."

Salah Issa, secretary-general of the Supreme Council for the Press, told Al-Monitor, "All judgments handed down in publication lawsuits are a return to hisbah lawsuits and are

contrary to the express provision of the constitution concerning the abolition of prison sentences for publication offenses." He added, "This problem is due to a text in the constitution that says that all laws that existed prior to the ratification of the constitution remain in effect until they are amended."

Pending those amendments, Issa said, "The prosecutor and the judges should apply the constitutional provisions that criminalize punishing all publication and expression cases," a move he described as "judicial harmonization." He added, "A judge who looks at such cases should only approve the fine, rather than imprisonment, so as not to conflict with the provisions of the constitution."

He called on parliament to quickly consider laws that complement the constitution.

A deputy in parliament who spoke on condition of anonymity told Al-Monitor, "Once we finish the Rules of Procedure of Parliament, we will look at all the laws that are incompatible with Egypt's constitution." He said hisbah lawsuits that punish opinions should be stopped.

Gamal Eid, head of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, talked with Al-Monitor about what effect the January 25 Revolution in 2011 had on freedom and on opinion lawsuits. Eid said that before the revolution, some hisbah lawsuits were used mistakenly to defend religion. Most such lawsuits are hypocritical, he said, noting that some people use them in attempts to become famous.

Eid questioned the role of the Egyptian parliament in addressing freedom of opinion and expression.

"Unfortunately, I don't trust parliament because these lawsuits are aimed at regime critics, and parliament is the regime's parliament," he said. "The solution is having an independent judiciary. ... The law requires the prosecution and the judiciary to not consider any lawsuit before making sure of the plaintiff's status and direct interest. Plaintiffs have no right filing lawsuits involving prison, but they are being accepted in violation of the law."

He concluded, "Whether or not the law is applied depends on how close the defendant is to regime circles."

The Naaot case was not the first time that a poet, writer or artist has been sentenced in a hisbah lawsuit. The most famous hisbah case in the 20th century was that of Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid, an Egyptian scholar who specialized in Islamic studies. On Aug. 5, 1996, the Egyptian Court of Cassation ruled on the forced separation of Nasr from his wife, Ibtihal Younis. The court ruled that he was an apostate from Islam because of the research he did to obtain a professorship at Cairo University. Since Islamic law forbids marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man, Abu Zeid's marriage was nullified. The court had deemed that his research was harmful to the Holy Quran and of scandalous ignorance.

Recently, an Egyptian court sentenced novelist Ahmed Naji to two years in jail on charges of offending public decency and using sexual terms in his novel "Isdikhdam al-Hayat" ("Using Life"). On Feb. 20, the court held that the novel was beyond the scope of literary writing.

On Dec. 29, an Egyptian court sentenced Islam al-Buhairi — Islamic scholar and host of the television show "With Islam al-Buhairi" — to one year in prison after accepting his appeal of a previous ruling sentencing him to five years for contempt of the Islamic religion.

Case Dropped against Christians arrested for evangelizing in Alexandria, Egypt

Morning Star News (26.02.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1T4337P> - A regional prosecuting attorney in Egypt has dismissed a case against three Christians arrested last summer and accused of blasphemy during an evangelistic outreach, their attorney said.

The three Christians, one of them a minor, were being investigated pending possible charges of "showing disdain" to a "heavenly religion" under a statute that in every way but its official title constitutes a blasphemy law. The attorney general of Alexandria, Chancellor Saeed Abd Al-Mohseen, dismissed the case on Feb. 2, but the ruling was not officially issued until Wednesday (Feb. 24).

The prosecutor dismissed the case after an appeal by Hamdi Al-Assuity, attorney for the three Christians arrested on July 11, 2015 in the port of city of Alexandria.

"After the appeal, the case was sent to the general prosecutor in Cairo, who sent it back to the attorney general in Alexandria, who closed the case for the lack of evidence," Al-Assuity told Morning Star News.

During the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, Fawzy Osama Ibrahim, 16, a first-year high school student, was arrested for handing out small bags of dates to passersby on the streets of Alexandria. In addition to the dates, a snack Muslims commonly eat when breaking Ramadan's daytime fast, the bags contained a statement about God's love and His omniscient nature.

"The Lord knows all that occurs, for He is the mighty knower," the message read. "He can carry on His shoulders all that is oppressive and exhausting and bring comfort and joy, for He loves you very much."

The bags also carried the name of an Arabic-language website about Jesus and the Christian faith.

The outreach offended a Salafi Muslim who forcibly detained the 16-year-old and took him to a police station, according to Al-Assuity.

Later in the evening, Ibrahim called a friend, Stephen Boutros Fayed, 21. Fayed and another friend, Shady Saeed, 20, went to the police station where Ibrahim was being held, and they were promptly arrested. Despite there being no evidence that the three were handing out dates together, police held all three in jail.

Two days later, on July 13, the three Christians were released on a 10,000 Egyptian pound (US\$1,280) bond, awaiting further investigation by the attorney general's office.

Immediately after his release, Fayed said on his Facebook page the arrest was unjust.

"If someone had been caught with hashish or was drinking alcohol on the street," he wrote, "it would have been easier for them than everything we've gone through."

Article 98F of Egypt's Penal Code, while not strictly a blasphemy statute, prohibits acts that show disdain or contempt for "any of the heavenly religions or the sects belonging thereto." A violation is punishable by detention for a period of not less than six months and not exceeding five years, or paying a fine of not less than 500 Egyptian pounds and not exceeding 1,000 Egyptian pounds.

Blasphemy cases have been on the rise since President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was sworn into office in 2014, according to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR). The blasphemy cases disproportionately target Christians, but other religious minorities, such as Shia Muslims and Baha'i, have also been charged with actions against a "heavenly religion."

Mina Thabet, program manager at the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms (ECRF), said that despite Sisi's fight to end the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and other hard-line Islamic groups in Egypt, Sisi is religiously conservative and much of the discrimination against Copts under former presidents Hosni Mubarak and Mohamed Morsi continues.

"The same restrictions on freedom of religion and belief exist, including the right to build churches, and impunity for sectarian violence perpetrators is still going on," Thabet said.

The constitution protects freedom of speech, which should include religious expression, but Al-Assuity said this right more often than not is trumped by politics.

"In Egypt there is no political will to put the articles from the constitution that guarantee freedom of expression and belief in effect the right way," Al-Assuity said. "These constitutional articles make Article 98F from the criminal code unconstitutional."

Another Egyptian Christian conscript dies in 'mysterious' circumstances

World Watch Monitor (14.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1PhsXUp> - Bishoy Natei Kamel was supposed to walk free from his military service in February. Instead, his family collected his body three months earlier. The corpse bore "signs of torture", the family said.

"When we reached the hospital that afternoon, we saw Bishoy's body reposed like an angel" said Natei Kamel, the father of the Coptic Christian, describing incidents on 20 Nov., at the end of the family's hurried journey to Cairo from their hometown of Mallawi, 270 kilometres south of the Egyptian capital.

The official version of their son's death was "suicide". His father rejects that conclusion.

"His body bore signs of torture and extensive violence. His forehead was protruding from swelling. He had an injury to his nose, clear bruises under his arm, his right ear and his right cheek, and other bruises to his back and abdomen", he said.

Bishoy Kamel's death is one of five similar cases, stretching back almost a decade. Each of the deaths, predominantly attributed to suicide, involved a Christian. Much to the families' anguish, claims of religious bullying were never properly investigated by the authorities.

An 'altercation'

A graduate of a vocational school at 18, Bishoy Kamel was drafted for 25 months of compulsory service to Egypt's Central Security Forces. Almost all males of age are subject to conscription; those with more education serve for shorter periods.

Conscripts serve at different army or police units, and reports of abuse, especially among the lesser educated, are common. Christians further complain of an added prejudice due to their religious identification.

On 5 Nov., the father learnt his son was incarcerated in his unit. Two days earlier, the 21-year-old Bishoy had hit a Muslim fellow conscript, Mustafa, on the head, causing a wound requiring 10 stitches. Later, after Bishoy's death, other conscripts told the father his son carried out the assault "after he had had enough of Mustafa's bullying".

"Over a period of time, Mustafa mocked and insulted Bishoy. He also picked on his Christian faith. Bishoy stayed calm, which angered Mustafa even more. He goaded him further until Bishoy lost his nerve", the father quoted his son's fellow soldiers as saying as they came to pay their respects at Bishoy's funeral.

Yet he said all seemed well when he tried to patch up the differences between Mustafa and his son, and the case had been adjourned following a plea for conciliation by the Bishoy's lawyer.

On 18 Nov., the martial court placed the two opponents in the same cell, something the lawyer Hani Ramsis said was a clear violation of the law.

Another inmate, named Mohamed, was moved that night into the tiny cell with both Mustafa and Bishoy, Ramsis said.

On the morning of 20 Nov., Natei Kamel received calls urging him to come to Cairo. Bishoy was dead.

At the unit's hospital, 24 kilometres east of Cairo, Natei saw his son's body, which he said bore marks of various injuries. "The top brass at the unit wanted us to immediately bury the body", he said. "We were told that Bishoy hanged himself in the cell. We did not believe them".

Unsubstantiated 'Suicide'

"Signs of torture could clearly be seen", the father said. "If someone would hang themselves, would they also injure their underarms? Would they beat their own back and stomach?"

We were told that Bishoy hanged himself in the cell. We did not believe them

And, the lawyer Ramsis noted, could Bishoy have hanged himself in a small cell containing two other inmates?

Ramsis advised his clients to insist on an autopsy. "We have seen this same pattern in earlier cases," he said, [referring to the death of another Christian conscript, Bahaa Silvanus](#), which the Army also classified as a suicide. "There was no evidence collected, no fingerprints taken, no investigation, nothing carried out, and yet they knew it was suicide".

"When we first arrived at the unit, an officer said Bishoy hanged himself," recalled Sami Kamel, the dead soldier's uncle. "We were told to wait until the officers became available after their Friday (Muslim) prayers!"

"They said Bishoy must have been scared of the martial court's decision on his earlier altercation with Mustafa. This cannot possibly be the case. Days before, he was assured of a good outcome owing to conciliation. Even if convicted, he could only expect a few months' sentence. He wouldn't execute himself!"

The allegedly hanging body, Ramsis said, was removed from the cell before investigators could arrive.

Third in a year

Bishoy Natei's death was the third of a Christian in Army or police service in 2015, Ramsis said.

Human-rights activists, meanwhile, accuse the authorities of obscuring the facts.

There was no evidence collected, no fingerprints taken, no investigation, nothing carried out, and yet they knew it was suicide

"Disputes could take place with one side a Muslim and the other a Christian. We see this all the time, especially in neglected governorates. Yet the onus is on the authorities to investigate, to find and punish the wrongdoer", said an official with a human-rights watchdog organization active in the Menia and Assiut governorates south of Cairo. World Watch Monitor is not publishing his name or the name of the NGO to help preserve his security.

"Sadly, these incidents, including against Christian army and (security forces) conscripts, keep happening in an atmosphere of impunity", he said. "One has to wonder how come Copts hurt themselves while serving in their units. It seems they like to die only in service".

A trail of deaths

Beyond the case of Bishoy Kamel, four of five Christian conscript deaths since 2006 have been automatically classified as suicide:

- Cpl. Hani Seraphim Nasralla, serving in the Aswan Southern Region. In August 2006, Nasralla's body was found dumped in the Nile River near Nag Hamadi, with apparent torture marks. According to family, shortly before his death Hani had complained of "trouble with his direct unit commander, because he was a Christian". The commander "was singling him out for punishment and public humiliations".
- Prv. Gerges Rizk Youssef Macar, died 18 Sept., 2006. The cause of death was stated as suicide.
- Prv. Abulkheir Atta Abulkheir, of Army Squad 18, serving close to a vending outlet near Damietta Stadium. Abulkheir 'died' 31 Aug., 2013 after a religious dispute with a fellow conscript who wanted to convert him to Islam. The Military Police informed the family the death was due to suicide.
- [Prv. Bahaa Gamal Mikhail Silvanus, 24, was found dead](#) 24 June, 2015 at his Air Defence unit in Suez. He had two bullet wounds, and the death was ruled to be suicide.
- Prv. Bahaa Saeed, died of four gunshots while stationed with his battalion in Marsa Matrouh, 258 kilometres west of Alexandria, in late August 2015. A Muslim fellow conscript admitted to killing Saeed. The case is still pending.