

**Refugee Review Tribunal
AUSTRALIA**

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

Questions

- 1. Please provide information on the situation for Coptic Christians in Egypt in 2002.**
- 2. Please provide info on the situation for Coptic Christians today.**
- 3. Please provide information on Jamaa Islamia and its activities.**
- 4. Does this group engage of discrimination/harassment of Christians?**
- 5. Do the authorities provide protection to Christians?**

RESPONSE

- 1. Please provide information on the situation for Coptic Christians in Egypt in 2002.**

An incident of violence in 2002 against Copts was in Upper Egypt:

On Sunday, 11 February, clashes between the Muslim and Coptic inhabitants of Bani Wallnems village, 30km from Maghagha, broke out leaving 11 injured, including two policemen. Part of the newly-constructed Al-Azra (The Virgin Mary) church and five houses belonging to Copts were torched, three cars destroyed and an entire village left in shock. Fifty people have been arrested in connection with the events.

Discussing the general situation, the report referred to an earlier incident:

The police's heightened sensitivity may have been a result of the bloody incident of sectarian strife that occurred over two years ago. On New Year's Eve of 2000, violent clashes erupted when a trade dispute went out of control in the mainly Coptic village of Al-Kosheh in southern Egypt. Twenty Copts and a Muslim were killed. A court in the Sohag governorate acquitted most of the defendants and issued light sentences on the rest. This triggered Coptic anger. The verdict was contested and a retrial was recently accepted.

Muslim-Coptic relations have soured over the past two decades, particularly in Upper Egypt. Observers attribute this to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and to the fact that the south of

the country remains underdeveloped and lacks basic services, such as electricity and fresh water, in many of its provinces. Critics argue that the official approach to the problem has focused on the security dimension -- such as tracking down Islamic militants -- at the expense of development (Howeirdy, A. 2002, 'Putting out the fire' *Al Ahram Weekly Online*, 20 February. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/573/eg4.htm> – Accessed 8 September 2006 – Attachment 1).

The US Department of State makes several relevant comments concerning the situation of Copts during 2002 in its International Religious Freedom Report:

In August 1999, the public prosecutor reopened and expanded an investigation of police torture of mostly Christian detainees that took place during the police investigation in August and September 1998 of the murder of Samir Aweda Hakim and Karam Tamer Arsal in the largely Coptic village of Al-Kush in Sohag governorate. However, the investigation made little progress since 2001 and appeared effectively closed. It is unclear whether religion was a factor in the 1998 actions of the police officers. Police abuse of detainees is a widespread practice that occurs regardless of a detainee's religious beliefs.

...

In past years, Coptic Christians have been the objects of occasional violent assaults by the Islamic Group and other terrorists. However, there have been no reports of terrorist attacks against Christians since 1998.

...

During the period covered by this report, the Government took several steps to promote and improve religious freedom and tolerance. Following terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001, and the increase in Israeli-Palestinian violence, government religious institutions such as Al-Azhar accelerated a schedule of interfaith discussions inside the country and abroad. The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Sheikh Tantawi and Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda participated in many joint public events, such as an October 11, 2001, conference entitled "World Developments and Implications for National Unity" and the May 2002 14th General Conference of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs. Sheikh Tantawi also participated in a January 2002 meeting organized by the Anglican Church in Alexandria of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian leaders from Egypt, Israel, and areas under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority. At the end of the conference, President Mubarak received the group, which issued a joint statement on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In May 2002, during a visit to the southern city of Sohag to inaugurate Islamic projects, Sheikh Tantawi visited the Coptic Orthodox Bishop of Sohag and gave a speech on the strong bond between Christians and Muslims.

...

During the period covered by this report, the Government took more prompt action than it had in the past to contain incidents of sectarian tension. In response to demonstrations by Christians in June 2001 following the publication of a newspaper story and photos regarding a defrocked Coptic monk, President Mubarak held a lengthy meeting with Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda on July 8, 2001, and the Government prosecuted the newspaper's publisher for slander (see Section III). When Muslim villagers burned a newly rebuilt church in Bani Walimss in the southern Egyptian province of Minya on February 10, 2002, the Governor of Minya went the same day to the church, met with the local bishop, and made a public statement denouncing the violence. The Government ordered the church to be rebuilt at Government expense, and it was reconsecrated in the presence of the Governor and Muslim clerics on April 27, 2002. In a number of cases reported in the media, Government officials participated in the consecration ceremonies for new churches. For example, on March 21, 2002, Pope Shenouda laid the cornerstone for the first Coptic Orthodox church in South Sinai province in the presence of Government officials, sheikhs from Al-Azhar, and a representative of the Holy See.

(US Department of State 2002, *Egypt International Religious Freedom Report*, October – Attachment 2).

The report also comments on the Bani Walimss attack (also mentioned in the above paragraph):

On February 10, 2002, Muslim villagers firebombed a newly reconstructed church in Bani Walimss, in the southern province of Minya, during the consecration ceremony, allegedly in reaction to prolonged tolling of the church bells. Local police intervened and halted the violence, during which several people were injured and property damaged; 49 persons were arrested. The Governor of Minya went to the church on the same day, made a public statement denouncing the violence, and met with the local bishop the same day, and the Government ordered that the damaged church and private properties be repaired at government expense. In March local government officials, parliamentarians, and Muslim and Christian clerics brokered a reconciliation between the Christian and Muslim families. Victims of the violence agreed not to press charges, and the 49 persons detained were released. On April 27, 2002, the repaired church was reconsecrated in the presence of the Governor and local Christian and Muslim clergy (US Department of State 2002, *Egypt International Religious Freedom Report*, October – Attachment 2).

In its report the following year, the following statements were made:

There was some improvement in the Government's respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, such as greater recognition and tolerance of Coptic Christians; however, the Government continued to fail to bring to justice those responsible for killing 21 Christians at Al-Kush, and converts from Islam face periodic detention and discrimination

The report also discusses discrimination against Copts:

The Constitution provides for equal public rights and duties without discrimination due to religion or creed, and in general, the Government upholds these constitutional protections; however, government discrimination against non-Muslims exists. There are no Christians serving as governors, presidents of public universities, or deans. There are few Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces. Although there has been improvement in a few areas, government discriminatory practices include: discrimination against Christians in the public sector; discrimination against Christians in staff appointments to public universities; payment of Muslim imams through public funds (Christian clergy are paid by private church funds); and refusal to admit Christians to Al-Azhar University (which is publicly funded). In general public university training programs for Arabic-language teachers refuse to admit non-Muslims because the curriculum involves the study of the Koran; however, in 2001 the first Christian graduated from an Arabic-language department at the Suez Canal University (US Department of State 2003, *Egypt International Religious Freedom Report 2003*, December – Attachment 3).

2. Please provide info on the situation for Coptic Christians today.

The US State Department's report on International Religious Freedom for 2005 makes the following relevant comments:

Tradition and some aspects of the law discriminated against religious minorities, including Christians and particularly Baha'is. ... In the past, the Government did not provide a legal means for converts from Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status. Approximately eight Muslims who had converted from Christianity were issued verdicts allowing recovery of their original Christian identities. However, this has not yet been tested in courts in the case of citizens originally Muslim who converted to Christianity. The Government also continued to prosecute a small number of citizens for unorthodox religious beliefs and practices alleged to "insult heavenly religions."

There continued to be religious discrimination and sectarian tension in society during the period covered by this report. In early December 2004, a three-way standoff at Cairo's Abbasiya Cathedral involving security forces, orthodox church officials, and several thousand Christian protestors ended with the return of Wafaa' Constantin, the wife of a Coptic Orthodox priest in the Nile Delta province of Beheira, to the protective custody of the church following her apparent elopement with a Muslim man and conversion to Islam in late November 2004. Although dozens of protestors and police were injured during the standoff, police did not respond with decisive force and made a notable effort to cooperate with Church authorities. However, a citizen filed a lawsuit against the Ministry of Interior (MOI)—responsible for handing Constantin back to the church—demanding Constantin's whereabouts. The exact course of events that led to the Constantin controversy, including her subsequent return to Christianity, remained unclear at the end of the reporting period.

...

The Government continued to encourage interfaith dialogue. The religious establishment of Al-Azhar and the Ministry of Awqaf (Islamic Religious Endowments) engaged in interfaith discussions, both domestically and abroad. Domestically, a Muslim-Christian conference in March, organized by the International Islamic Forum and the Middle East Council of Churches, included dialogue on cooperation, mutual respect, family values, and peaceful coexistence. The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Sheikh Tantawi and Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda presided over opening ceremonies. Government literacy programs promoted reading materials that encourage mutual tolerance. In January 2004, the Government formed the National Council for Human Rights (NCHR), which was entrusted with protecting, supporting, developing, upholding, and improving the status of human rights, including religious freedom. The Government appointed a Coptic Christian as president and named prominent Copts to 5 of the Council's 25 seats. The Council released its first report in March. Although the Council did not give significant attention in its report to issues of religious freedom, it submitted a total of 27 requests to the Ministry of Interior and several governorates in Upper Egypt requesting action on numerous complaints it had received concerning alleged violations of religious freedom. Twenty-three of the requests the Council submitted dealt with church repair and construction; however, according to the Council's report, the Ministry of Interior had not responded to any of the requests.

The following religious holy days are designated national holidays: Eid Al-Fitr, Eid Al-Adha, the Islamic new year, the birth of the Prophet Muhammed, and Coptic Christmas (January 7). (US Department of State 2005, *Egypt International Religious Freedom Report 2005*, November – Attachment 4)

One of the main issues relates to the construction and repair of churches:

According to statistics published by the Government's Official Gazette, 12 Presidential decrees were issued from July 1, 2004, through June 30, 2005, for church-related construction, compared with seven permits reported during the previous period. 6 of these 12 permits were for evangelical Christian churches, 5 for Coptic churches, and 1 for a Catholic church. Government officials have previously asserted that the Government approves a much larger number of projects for church construction and expansion, through informal arrangements between church authorities and local security and administrative officials. Overall, the approval process for church construction continued to be hindered by time delays often measured in years, and the Government continued to be insufficiently responsive to the requests of Christians. (US Department of State 2005, *Egypt International Religious Freedom Report 2005*, November – Attachment 4)

There are though reports of continued discrimination against Copts as raised in the 2003:

There are few Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces. Government discriminatory practices continued to include discrimination against Christians in the public sector, discrimination against Christians in staff appointments to public universities, payment of Muslim imams through public funds (Christian clergy are paid by private church funds), and refusal to admit Christians to Al-Azhar University (a publicly-funded institution). In general, public university training programs for Arabic language teachers refuse to admit non-Muslims because the curriculum involves the study of the Qur'an. There have been no reports of Christian graduates since 2001. (US Department of State 2005, *Egypt International Religious Freedom Report 2005*, November – Attachment 4)

In April this year, 3 congregations were attacked in Coptic churches, resulting in one death. Following the funeral, riots broke out between Copts and Muslims:

The latest skirmishes broke out near one of three churches attacked by armed men on Friday, reports said. At least one person has died in violence since the stabbing. Egyptian officials have blamed the attacks on extremists, but Coptic Christians say the government is not doing enough to protect them. Sunday's violence erupted shortly after a religious service ended at the Saints Church, the Associated Press news agency reported

... Saturday's violence followed the funeral of Nushi Atta Girgis, 78, who died in one of three knife attacks on Friday. Mourners shouted anti-government slogans as the funeral procession – attended by an estimated 3,000 people – turned into a protest outside the church where the funeral was held.

... Coptic Christians make up 10% of the Egyptian population and have complained of harassment and discrimination. Some Copts argue that previous attacks on them have gone unpunished or have drawn light sentences ('Sectarian tensions flare in Egypt' 2006, *BBC News* 16 April, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4914172.stm – Accessed 5 September 2006 – Attachment 5).

In Odaysat, a Christian group was attacked after it attempted to convert a house:

At least 12 people were injured in clashes in Upper Egypt when a group of Muslims attempted to stop Christians converting a house into a church. Security officials said the Muslims set fire to building materials for the building in Odaysat, near Luxor. Several members of both communities were reported injured in the subsequent clashes, as well as two policemen. It is the

latest in a series of violent sectarian incidents in Egypt in the past few months. A security source quoted by Reuters said the Christians did not have official permission to build the church. Police arrested 10 young men and the owners of the house, reports say. Correspondents say curbs on building churches have been one of the main grievances among Copts, although these restrictions have been eased recently by presidential decree ('Egyptian church clash injures 12' 2006, *BBC News* 19 January, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4628168.stm – Accessed 5 September 2006 – Attachment 6).

In October 2005, several people were killed following riots against a play, being performed at a Coptic Church, which was deemed to be offensive to Muslims:

Three people have died during a riot outside a Coptic church in Alexandria, Egypt, after a protest against a play accused of offending Islam. Police used sticks and tear gas to hold back a crowd of some 5,000 protesters who marched on St George's church. Dozens of people were injured in the crush. One man who died was trampled and had inhaled tear gas, police said. On Wednesday, a Muslim man stabbed a nun in protest at the sale of a DVD of the play, staged at the church in 2003. The demonstration was the latest in a series of incidents at the church related to the performance of the play. Entitled *I Once Was Blind But Now I See*, the drama tells the story of a poor young Copt who is drawn to Islamist militants who then try to kill him ('Three killed in Egypt church riot', 2005, *BBC News*, 22 October, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4366232.stm – Accessed 8 September 2006 – Attachment 7).

The Egyptian authorities also reported having disrupted a terrorist cell which planned attacks on Christians:

Officials say the group intended to carry out attacks on a number of Coptic Christian leaders and tourist targets, as well as a gas pipeline. There was no immediate word on the number or identity of those arrested. The interior ministry said the group was called al-Taefa al-Mansura, or Victorious Faction, and had 22 members based mainly in Cairo suburbs. It was led by Ahmed Muhammad Ali Gabr, alias Abu Musab, it added. "Information, documents and interviews confirmed they had studied carrying out terrorist operations," it said ('Egypt 'breaks up terrorist ring' 2006 *BBC News* 19 April http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4922658.stm – Accessed 5 September 2006 – Attachment 8).

The following report makes a more general statement concerning discrimination against Copts:

"But anyone who follows the events and the facts of daily life has noticed what the official discourse hides. Harassment has increased and the discrimination between Muslims and Christians has gotten worse... The state has not lifted a finger [to stop] the escalation in the discourse of the extremists, who support the Islamist movements and control the various institutions – particularly the media institutions... (Grami, A. (undated), 'Tunisian Reformist Researcher on Discrimination Against Christians in Egypt' Coptic Information Centre website, <http://www.copts.net/detail.asp?id=902> – Accessed 8 September 2006 – Attachment 9)

There are also reports of religious inspired attacks:

A Muslim ex-convict stabbed and killed a Christian cobbler northeast of Cairo in June, confessing that he had planned to murder him because he was an 'infidel' who had made an offhand comment that offended him. Hossam Hafez Ahmad Attaya knifed Fouad Fawzy Tawfik on June 27 as the shoemaker was bending down to take the Muslim man's foot measurement near his shop in Zagazig. "I want to kill him because he is an infidel, let me kill them all!"

Attaya was heard to shout as he sunk an eight-inch blade into the Christian's left lung and stomach, according to Tawfik's family. The shoemaker died minutes later from loss of blood. Attaya admitted during questioning that he had planned the murder in response to a joke Tawfik had made several days before, lawyer Fady Nabil Labib told Compass. Attaya was angry at Tawfik's comment that "tomorrow America is going to invade Egypt and kill everyone in it." ('News Summaries' 2006 *Compass Direct*, August 26 – Attachment 10)

3. Please provide information on Jamaa Islamia and its activities.

Research Response EGY23822 (Attachment 11) provides some details on Jamaa Islamia with attachments providing more details. See also ('Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya' wikipedia website (undated), http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Gama'a_al-Islamiyya – Accessed 5 September 2006 – Attachment 12).

4. Does this group engage of discrimination/harassment of Christians?

Prior to its ceasefire in 1999 (some reports say there was an initial ceasefire in 1997) the group did target Copts:

Most of the group's attacks have been against Egyptian and other government officials, Coptic Christians, and Egyptian opponents of "Islamic extremism." [1,2] Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya is believed to pursue lower-profile targets than other Egyptian Islamist groups. The group issued a ceasefire in March 1999, which was rescinded by al-Rahman in June 2000 ('Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya' (undated) Center for Nonproliferation Studies website, <http://cns.miis.edu/research/wtc01/algamaa.htm> – Accessed 7 September 2006 – Attachment 13).

Since the ceasefire was issued, the group appears to have split:

In a taped message aired on Saturday on the Qatari-based satellite channel Al-Jazeera, Al-Qaeda deputy Ayman El-Zawahri claimed that five leaders of Egypt's Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya had joined his network.

... In a telephone interview on Sunday with Al-Jazeera, his first since being released in 2003, Karam Zohdi, head of Al-Gamaa's Shura Council, said that he was sorry "that Zawahri would promote such lies". Zohdi reiterated his group's renunciation of violence and noted that statements made by dissidents from any group could only refer to their personal positions (Halawi, J. 'Committed to peace' *Al Ahrum weekly on-line*, 16 August <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/807/eg2.htm> – Accessed 7 September 2006 – Attachment 14).

The splinter group signed Osama bin Laden's Fatwa in 1998:

The more peaceful wing is headed by Mustafa Hamza, who has called for a unilateral cease fire. He is opposed by Rifa'i Taha Musa, a violent extremist who continues to advocate attacks on civilians. In 1998, he signed bin Laden's *fatwa* calling for *jihād* against Americans and, in early 2001, he published a book in which he attempted to justify terrorist attacks that would cause mass casualties. He has since gone into hiding. There are conflicting reports about his current whereabouts. (Keats, A. 2002, 'In the Spotlight: Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya – Islamic Group', Centre for Defense Information website, <http://www.cdi.org/terrorism/algamaa-pr.cfm> – Accessed 8 September 2006 – Attachment 15)

A search of the Tribunal's resources was made, including, but not limited to Factiva, Al Ahram weekly and the US State Department. No reports of attacks on Copts by the splinter group have been found.

Similarly the main part of Jamaa Islamia (or Islamic Group (IG)) appears to have carried out no attacks:

The IG, Egypt's largest militant group, has been active since the late 1970s and is a loosely organized network. It has an external wing with supporters in several countries. The group's issuance of a cease-fire in 1997 led to a split into two factions: one, led by Mustafa Hamza, supported the cease-fire; the other, led by Rifa'i Taha Musa, called for a return to armed operations. The IG issued another ceasefire in March 1999, but its spiritual leader, Shaykh Umar Abd al-Rahman, sentenced to life in prison in January 1996 for his involvement in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and incarcerated in the United States, rescinded his support for the cease-fire in June 2000. IG has not conducted an attack inside Egypt since the Luxor attack in 1997, which killed 58 tourists and four Egyptians and wounded dozens more. (US Department of State 2006, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2005*, April – Attachment 16)

5. Do the authorities provide protection to Christians?

President Mubarak made the following statement during a TV interview, 26 April 2005, "Muslim, Copt and Jew are one and the same — they are all citizens of this country with no difference between them." (US Department of State 2005, *Egypt International Religious Freedom Report 2005*, November – Attachment 4). The 2003 report makes similar supportive statements concerning the Government's attitude:

Although some Coptic activists maintain that government officials do not respond effectively to instances of alleged kidnapping, in April police in Minya intervened in the case of Nivine Malak Kamel, a 17-year-old Christian girl allegedly kidnapped by Muslim Reda Hussan Abu Zeid. In May police returned her to her family.

...

In December 2002, President Mubarak announced that January 7, Christmas on the Eastern calendar, would henceforth be a national holiday. Pope Shenouda, other Christian leaders, and the Muslim community warmly welcomed the move as an important symbol of acknowledgment of the rights and status of Christians in society. Subsequently, Gamal Mubarak, son of the president and a senior figure in the ruling National Democratic Party, attended Christmas Eve services, a move interpreted as a demonstration of interfaith tolerance.

...

On February 27, the retrial of 96 defendants tried in connection with the December 1999-January 2000 violence, which left 21 Christians and 1 Muslim dead in the village of Al-Kush, ended with the acquittal of 93 and the conviction of 3. Of the three convicted, one Muslim defendant was found guilty of killing the sole Muslim victim (mistaken for a Christian), and was sentenced to 3 years. A third was convicted of destruction of property. Charges against a fourth deceased defendant were dropped. On March 13, the Egyptian Office of the Public Prosecutor, unsatisfied with the failure to hold any persons responsible for the deaths of the Christians, appealed the case to the Court of Cassation. During the period covered by this report, no date had been set for the Court to hear the case (US Department of State 2003, *Egypt International Religious Freedom Report 2003*, December – Attachment 3).

There are reports that the judicial system does not always protect Christians:

In June 2004, the Court of Cassation, the country's highest appellate court, upheld the acquittal of 94 of 96 suspects who were charged with various offenses committed during the early 2000

sectarian violence in the town of al-Kush, which left 21 Christians dead. The Court's decision left public prosecutors and human rights activists with no further legal options.

In an earlier incident, Shayboub William Aarsal, a Coptic Christian, was convicted and sentenced for the 1998 murders of two Copts in al-Kush. His appeal, which has been pending for 5 years, had not been heard. The local Christian community believed that Shayboub was accused and convicted of the crime because of his religion. (US Department of State 2005, *Egypt International Religious Freedom Report 2005*, November – Attachment 4)

List of Sources Consulted

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Non-Government Organisations

Human Rights Watch <http://www.hrw.org/>

International Crisis Group <http://www.crisisweb.org/>

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BBC News <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

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Search Engines

Google <http://www.google.com.au/>

Copernic <http://www.copernic.com/>

Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIMA Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

RRT Library Catalogue

List of Attachments

1. Howeirdy, A. 2002, 'Putting out the fire' *Al Ahram Weekly Online*, 20 February. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/573/eg4.htm> – Accessed 8 September 2006.
2. US Department of State 2002, *Egypt International Religious Freedom Report*, October.
3. US Department of State 2003, *Egypt International Religious Freedom Report 2003*, December.
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16. US Department of State 2006, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2005*, April.