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EGYPT Country overlooked in State Department's religious freedom report

Courtesy of International Christian Concern (www.persecution.org)

International Christian Concern (ICC) commends the Obama administration's designation of eight nations as "countries of particular concern" (CPCs) – a classification appointed to countries that severely violate religious freedom – in the State Department's Annual Report on International Religious Freedom released on Tuesday. However, the report failed to designate Egypt as a CPC despite the increase of violence targeting religious minorities and the killings of more than fifty Christians in 2011.

On April 28, the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission, had recommended for the first time that the State Department designate Egypt as a CPC. *"Instances of severe religious freedom violations engaged in or tolerated by the government have increased dramatically,"* said USCIRF Chair Leonard Leo. *"Since President Mubarak's resignation from office in February, such violence continues unabated without the government's bringing the perpetrators to justice."*

Attacks against Egyptian Christians in 2011 include, but are not limited to:

- The bombing outside the Church of the Two Saints on New Year's morning that killed 23 worshippers leaving a midnight mass celebration in Alexandria.
- The destruction of a church by a Muslim mob following reports of a romantic relationship between a Christian man and a Muslim woman in the village of Sol on March 5.
- The killing of nine Coptic Christians by a radical mob and the Egyptian military while Copts were protesting in the Mokattam Hills in Cairo on March 9.
- The killing of twelve Christians and Muslims by an Islamist group that attacked St. Mina Church and Virgin Mary Church in the Imbaba district of Cairo on May 7. One church was burned to the ground and numerous Christian-owned apartments and shops were vandalized and looted.

Egyptian Christians are also concerned that religious freedom will decline further if Islamist-based parties win the majority seat in Egypt's parliament in elections scheduled for November. The Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party is the most organized and financed contender in the elections and has publicly stated their intention to institute forms of Sharia (Islamic law) in the country.

While the U.S. gives 1.3 billion dollars in foreign military assistance to the Egyptian government annually, a CPC designation can carry economic sanctions if the Egyptian government fails to address U.S. concerns. Several U.S. congressmen have voiced frustration to ICC over the "illogical" approach taken by the U.S. in continuing to give billions of dollars in aid to a government that is yet to be elected and that may not be interested in honoring previous agreements made between the U.S. and Egypt, like maintaining a peace treaty with Israel.

"Egypt should be classified as a CPC," Coptic scholar Magdi Khalil told ICC. *"Further monitoring of persecution, like the special envoy to promote religious freedom in the Middle East known as [house bill] H.R. 440, would be pushed forward quicker and taken more seriously if Egypt was a CPC."*

Aidan Clay, ICC Regional Manager for the Middle East, said, *"In light of increasing attacks on Christian*

communities and the Egyptian government's failure to enhance security and institute nondiscriminatory reforms to protect religious minorities, we urge the Obama administration to strongly consider designating Egypt as a CPC. A CPC designation will give the U.S. additional leverage to place sanctions on existing military and emergency economic aid and to direct a portion of that aid to enhance security for religious minorities and fund civil society groups who are adamant about promoting religious freedom."