



5.25.2012

## EGYPT | Twelve Christians sentenced to life imprisonment in “serious miscarriage of justice”

Twelve Christians were sentenced to life imprisonment in Egypt on May 21, 2012 in connection with an outbreak of sectarian violence in April 2011 that left three people dead. Eight Muslims jointly charged in the case were acquitted.

Sources close to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) described the decision by Judge Abdel Fattah Ahmend al-Sughayar of Minya Criminal Court as a “serious miscarriage of justice”.

The conflict in April 2011 reportedly began after a Muslim bus driver became angry over a speed bump outside the home of a wealthy Coptic attorney and instigated a crowd, brandishing weapons, to assist him in removing it. Fearing an imminent attack, the guard at the house began to shoot, killing two Muslims and injuring two others. Following the funerals of the two dead, a mob of local Muslims, accompanied by Salafis, burnt down scores of Christian homes and businesses. During the violence an elderly Coptic woman died after being thrown from a balcony, while a Coptic man was critically injured. According to members of the local Coptic community, when security forces arrived at the scene they did not intervene to stem the violence.

The Coptic men arrested in connection with the violence were convicted of sowing public strife, the possession of illegal weapons and killing two Muslims. The Coptic attorney, who was not even at home when the deaths occurred, was one of those sentenced to life imprisonment. The eight Muslim men who were acquitted had been charged with possession of illegal weapons and burning down the homes and businesses of Christians. No one was charged with the murder of the elderly Christian lady. Of particular concern is the fact that this case was conducted in a military court; thus the military council is the only body with the authority to grant a retrial.

As Egypt votes in its first presidential elections, this case highlights continuing lack of equality under the law for the Coptic community, which was also prevalent under the regime of Hosni Mubarak. On May 14, the Muslim Brotherhood's presidential candidate Muhamed Mousa made it clear that Shari'a law and the Qur'an should be the basis of the Egyptian constitution, a document that is yet to be drafted. There are legitimate concerns that such a move would effectively relegate non-Muslims to second class citizens. The interim Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Bishop Pachomius, has said that the Egyptian constitution must be drafted in such a manner that accommodates equality for all citizens.

CSW's Advocacy Director, Andrew Johnston, said, “There are several worrying aspects to this case. While there is no question that the guilty should be punished, there remain worrying indications that the twelve men may not have received due legal process. As civilians, they should not have been brought before a military tribunal. Moreover, the unequal application of justice in this case is an unfortunate illustration of how Egyptian Christians are not treated equally under the law. Over the past few years, we have seen various attacks on Coptic communities in Egypt, without any justice for the victims. This has led to a cycle of impunity for aggressors. Egyptian Christians simply desire to participate as full and equal citizens of their country. CSW calls on Egypt's interim military rulers to allow a re-examination of this case, preferably in a civil court, and urges the government to ensure justice and protection for all Egyptians, regardless of their creed.”