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EGYPT CSW expresses concern at violence toward Coptic protesters in Egypt

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is deeply concerned at events in Cairo's Giza governorate yesterday, when one man was killed and scores more were injured during a protest by Coptic Christians.

According to news reports, the unrest took place in the Talibiya district of Cairo's Giza governorate after the authorities ordered a halt to construction on a church because it reportedly lacked the required permits.

Coptic sources insist that permission to build the church had been granted, and approximately 150 Copts gathered in protest at the site of the nearly-completed church, which was formerly a community centre. Around 5,000 police in riot gear were sent to the scene, and subsequent clashes turned violent. The incident took place just days before the national elections.

The patriarch of the Coptic Church, Egypt, His Holiness Pope Shenouda III criticized the heavy handed treatment of the protesters by the police in his weekly address. In a comment to CSW, His Grace Bishop Angaelos of the Coptic Orthodox Church UK said, "We completely reject the use of violence. This is not in the nature of Egyptian Copts. However, we believe the demonstration could have been policed in a much better manner and that the mishandling of the demonstration by the police force caused it to spiral out of control".

Churches in Egypt are required to obtain a presidential decree to construct new religious buildings, which compares unfavorably with the straightforward process of obtaining permission to build a mosque. A unified law for building places of worship, that would end this anomaly by regulating the construction of both mosques and churches, has been before the Egyptian parliament since 2005 but has yet to be finalized.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "We are saddened to hear of the unnecessary loss of life and the many injuries sustained after the protest turned violent. Excessive police tactics, including the throwing of stones at the protesters, contributed to a peaceful protest degenerating into a street brawl. CSW urges the Egyptian government to address the restrictive church building regulations that sparked this protest by finalizing a unified law for the construction of places of worship in order to avert future tension. We also call for the exercising of restraint when policing protests on such a delicate issue."