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EGYPT | No justice for victims on anniversary of Maspero massacre

Peaceful protests are scheduled to take place today to commemorate what has been termed “Egypt’s Bloody Sunday”, when unarmed demonstrators peacefully protesting the destruction of a Coptic church in Mari Nab, Aswan district, were surrounded and attacked by members of the security services outside the state television centre in Cairo’s Maspero suburb, resulting in 27 deaths and hundreds of injuries.

Victims’ families are still awaiting real justice one year on from the attack on peaceful Christian and Muslim protestors. The majority of victims suffered gunshot injuries, while others were severely beaten. Video footage depicts soldiers driving armored vehicles at the crowd, mowing down a number of people, several of whom were crushed to death. During the violence, state media was widely criticized for playing an inflammatory role by calling on “honorable citizens” to “defend” the army from allegedly “armed” Coptic attackers.

At a press conference following the incident, the Egyptian military denied responsibility for the deaths; however, in September 2012, three Egyptian soldiers were convicted and sentenced to between two and three years on a lesser charge of manslaughter of 14 of the 27 victims. While no action has yet been taken against senior army officials, in early October 2012, 24 complaints were submitted to the Justice Minister, calling for an investigation into the role in the killings of former leader of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), Field Marshal Tantawi; former chief of staff Sami Anan; former head of the military police Hamdy Badeen and current head of the military police Ibrahim El-Domiaty.

On 3 October, the Coptic Orthodox Church commemorated the Maspero victims during a liturgy at St Mark’s Cathedral in Abbaseya led by Metropolitan Pachomius of Beheira, the interim leader of the Church.

The Maspero anniversary comes at a time of mounting anxiety in Egypt’s Coptic community. Within the last two weeks Coptic families have been fleeing Rafah in the Sinai area following extremist threats and two shooting incidents that fortunately claimed no lives. In addition, two illiterate Coptic children under the age of ten were detained after being accused of desecrating the Qur’an, but have been released pending a full trial. In a statement issued on 7 October, Coptic Organizations UK described the latter case as an “abuse of the role of law and a clear miscarriage of justice [...] in direct violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which Egypt is signatory country.”

Andrew Johnston, Advocacy Director at Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) said, “We extend our sympathies to the families of the dead on a sad anniversary that has been made even more difficult by the fact that they have yet to see justice for their loved ones. It is unacceptable that despite undisputable video footage and eyewitness testimonies clearly attesting to the security forces turning its firepower on unarmed civilians, there has been no real accountability, as three soldiers of lowly rank have received paltry sentences for the lesser crime of manslaughter of around half the victims. We urge the Egyptian government to proceed with a transparent investigation without delay and to ensure that those deemed responsible for this appalling incident not only face appropriate charges, but are also prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, regardless of social standing. CSW also calls on the new Egyptian government to guarantee protection, justice and equality for all citizens, regardless of creed or background, and that the Coptic minors charged with blasphemy are treated in accordance with the binding obligations of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.”