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EGYPT | Expelled Coptic Families Return Home

A group of five Coptic families from the village of Kafr Darwish in Upper Egypt returned to their homes June 2 after they were expelled following sectarian violence in the Beni Suef Governorate, 62 miles south of Cairo.

The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) reports that the families were forced to leave their village after claims that one of the sons, Ayman Youssef Tawfiq, uploaded cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed to Facebook sparking violence from gangs of Muslim youth, who attacked the homes and businesses of local Copts with stones and Molotov cocktails. During the violence, another group of Muslim youths reportedly helped the Coptic families defend their homes, along with the police who reacted promptly.

Following a series of reconciliation meetings in the town of al-Fashn between the families, the local Coptic community, local Muslims and security staff, the five families were ordered to leave the village. Violence continued after the families were forcibly evicted from the village. Their homes and fields were burnt, their crops destroyed and their cattle killed. The homes of 10 other Coptic families were also reportedly set alight.

Following the eviction, local Coptic families and church members were visited by the mayor of al-Fashn, Ahmed Maher, and Governor Muhammad Selim of Beni Suef, to discuss possible remedies that would allow the five families to return. In addition to these efforts, Beit al-A'ila (House of the Egyptian Family), an interfaith initiative which seeks to promote a culture of tolerance and militate against sectarianism, sent a delegation of Muslim clerics to al-Fashn to establish conditions for the families to return safely.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "While Christian Solidarity Worldwide welcomes the positive steps taken by local authorities to secure their safe return, the eviction of the families was unacceptable. Their case highlights the unsatisfactory nature of reconciliation sessions, which impose ad-hoc, unjust and often un-constitutional conditions on the victims of sectarian violence, who subsequently have no recourse to judicial remedies. CSW urges the security forces in al-Fashn to investigate and to bring the perpetrators of this violence to justice. We urge the Interior Ministry and other authorities to end the use of reconciliation meetings to settle sectarian tensions, as these perpetuate impunity for the perpetrators, who face no consequences for their crimes. Local authorities must also ensure that the five families receive adequate and timely compensation."