



RELIGIOUS LIBERTY ATTACKED IN EGYPT

USCCB Fact Sheet

2013

Christians in Egypt: Solidarity or Suffering?

In early January 2012, at Midnight Mass celebrating the birth of Christ, the Coptic Catholic church in Luxor, Egypt was surrounded by Muslims. These Muslims were not there to attack the worshippers, but rather to protect them. Muslims formed a cordon of security around the church. Some even took part in the service to visibly demonstrate their solidarity with Christians.

Bishop Johannes Zakaria, the Coptic Catholic Bishop of Luxor, was moved to say, "I was able to witness in person how ordinary Muslims – just normal people who live around us – embraced our community. ... These brethren of ours have rejected violence; have asserted that terrorism is not true Islam.

While this expression of solidarity and support was much appreciated, unfortunately Christians in Egypt frequently face discrimination, attacks, bombings and killings at the hands of extremists intent on taking advantage of current political instability to promote an agenda of intolerance for any religion except Islam.

Coptic Christians make up about ten-percent of Egypt's 86 million people. Of that number, the vast majority are Coptic Orthodox. Coptic Catholics number about 250,000. Under President Hosni Mubarak, Christians needed special permission to build or repair their churches. They were discriminated against in employment, particularly for high-level positions in the government and military. Worse yet, vandalism and violent attacks against Christian communities and

businesses, some resulting in deaths, usually went unpunished.

Both Christians and Muslims joined together in Tahrir Square to help bring down the Mubarak government. In light of this fact, many Christians thought life would improve and that they would be able to participate more equally in Egyptian society. Instead, conditions have worsened. Extremists have taken advantage of instability.

Churches in Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor, and other parts of the country have been bombed, and the level of violence directed against Christians has increased. For example, in October 2011, a peaceful protest by Christians about lack of police response to attacks on two churches in southern Egypt that left 12 dead and over 200 injured was met by Army tanks and guns that killed at least 17 protesters.

Egypt now has its first democratically elected president, but Christians wonder if the human rights of all, including religious minorities, will be respected. Many question provisions in the new Constitution that may undermine their rights.

Countless Egyptian Christians have fled Egypt since March 2011 with some 100,000 coming to the U.S. alone. But the vast majority of Christians remain in Egypt despite the uncertainty of what lies ahead. They and their leaders are working with Muslims of good will to build an inclusive society respectful of the human rights of all.

What can you do to ensure the protection of religious freedom at home and abroad?

The U.S. Bishops have called for a Fortnight for Freedom from June 21 to July 4.

Please visit www.fortnight4freedom.org for more information on this important time of prayer, education, and action in support of religious liberty!