

Why does Egypt persecute Christians?



**Poster showing
Nagaa Hammadi victims**

On Wednesday 6th January 2010, **six Coptic Christians and a Muslim security guard were killed** outside a church in Nagaa Hammadi in southern Egypt. The victims were shot by attackers from a car outside the church as they left a Christmas Eve Mass (Christmas is celebrated in Egypt on 7th January). The attack took place after threats had been made to the Coptic priest, Bishop Kirillos. Three Muslim men were arrested two days after the attack and charged with murder.

The shootings have prompted protests by Copts inside Egypt and abroad.

The Egyptian government reacted to the attack by imposing a news blackout and police arrested almost 100 Coptic teenagers in a move to appear even-handed. Many of the teenagers have reported that they

were tortured – by electric shock treatment to the genitals – by the Egyptian security police who wanted them to blame Bishop Kirillos for organising protests following the killings. In late February, 15 Coptic teenagers continued to be detained though their release was promised by the Egyptian Attorney General following protests in Cairo.

This tactic of arresting innocent Copts as well as Muslim suspects has been used in many previous incidents when Copts have been attacked.

The innocent Copts are often used as “hostages” in an effort to dissuade Coptic victims from pressing charges against their attackers. The Egyptian government has tried strenuously to portray the attack as an isolated criminal incident and has taken the unprecedented step of instructing its ambassadors to try to influence world opinion to accept this view and to discredit the Coptic protests.

Christians, mainly Coptic Orthodox, form 10% of the population of Egypt.

The latest in a long line of attacks...

The attack on Nagaa Hammadi is the latest in a long line of attacks on the Coptic church dating back 40 years. Recent attacks include :

9 Feb 2010 Malak Saad was shot dead outside Coptic premises in Teta village in Menoufia Province. Police sealed off the village immediately after the shooting and the Egyptian government later stated that Malak had been shot by mistake by a police guard. However, a relative of Malak disputed this version, stating that the police guard had exchanged a few words with Malak before shooting him at close range.

16 Sept 2009 63-year-old Coptic Christian Abdo George Younan was stabbed nine times and then beheaded by a Muslim attacker, Osama Araban, outside his shop in a village north of Cairo. The attacker then travelled by motorbike to attack Christians in two other villages. At Abdo's funeral, mourners carried signs that read, *"Where are you, government? The terrorists are going to kill us."*



The daughter of Abdo Younan is comforted at his funeral



Maysoon Ghatas (11) youngest victim of the El-Kosheh massacre

The worst incident of violent attack occurred on **2 Jan 2000** in the village of El-Kosheh in Sohag province in southern Egypt. **Twenty-one Coptic Christians (men, women and children) were killed in three days of rioting.** Although 89 Muslims were arrested and charged, all were later released.

At least 120 documented cases of violence against Copts took place between 1972 and 2009, which demonstrates the state's failure to deal adequately with religious sectarianism.

Many attacks on Christians occur when local Muslims suspect Christians of carrying out unauthorised repairs to church buildings, or using homes for church services. It is very difficult for Christians to obtain government permission to build or repair churches.

The kidnapping of teenage Christian girls



**Nermeen Mitry (16)
kidnapped and
rescued in May 2009**

Many Egyptian Christian families live in fear of their teenage daughters being kidnapped. **Typically, a girl is drugged and then abducted.** When she wakes up, she is immediately threatened with death unless she converts to Islam. Following her “conversion”, she is married to the Muslim man who has arranged her kidnapping. **Christians protest that the Egyptian police do not act fairly in such cases.** They often fail to act when such kidnappings are reported. However, if the girl’s family is successful in rescuing her, police often intervene swiftly and try to return the girl to the Muslim “husband”.

A report published in November 2009 by Christian Solidarity International and Coptic Foundation for Human Rights documents dozens of cases and demonstrates consistent patterns used by the perpetrators.

“Everyone has the right to change religion”

The Egyptian government is a signatory of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees the freedom to change one’s religion. However, while Christians can easily convert to Islam if they choose, **no Egyptian has ever been successful in officially changing their religion** (as stated on their national identity card) **from Islam to Christianity.**

Maher El-Gohary (56) left Islam to become a Christian over 35 years ago. Since then, he has been living with Muslim identity papers. In 2008, he took a court case to change his religion officially from Islam to Christianity. He wants his daughter Dina (15) who has been brought up as a Christian to be able to secure a Christian identity card when she turns 16.

Dina is officially viewed as Muslim because her father’s Christian faith is not recognised. **Maher and Dina have been living in hiding since the case began because of threats against them.** Maher’s case was rejected in June 2009 even though he provided a conversion certificate. Maher and Dina have been prevented from leaving Egypt.



**Dina El-Gohary (15) and
her father, Maher**

What you can do to help

The Coptic Church in Ireland and *Church in Chains* representatives have separately met the Egyptian Ambassador to Ireland, Mr Amr Helmy, in the aftermath of the Nagaa Hammadi attack to express their concerns.

It is important that the Egyptian government continues to be reminded of its obligations under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. You can help by sending a short message (by post or email) to the Egyptian Ambassador to Ireland and also to President Mubarak.

Express concern about the situation of Christians in Egypt and ask the Egyptian government to act to promote religious freedom and protect Christians from further attack. Begin your message to both Ambassador and President with *Your Excellency* and end with *Yours respectfully*

Write to the Egyptian Ambassador to Ireland

**Mr Amr Helmy, Ambassador,
Embassy of the Arab Republic of Egypt,
12 Clyde Road,
Dublin 4.**

(55c stamp)

Email: info@embegyptireland.ie



Write to President Mubarak



**President Mohammad Hosni Mubarak,
Abedine Palace,
Cairo,
Egypt**

(82c stamp)

Email: webmaster@presidency.gov.eg

This information leaflet has been produced with reference to many sources including the following: Almasryalyoum.com, Assyrian International News Agency and Compass Direct



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