

Amnesty International

Public Statement

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Cold-blooded murder of Copts in Libya a war crime

The horrific execution-style killing of 21 Coptic Christians in Libya by the group calling itself the Tripoli Province of Islamic State is a war crime and an attack on the fundamental principles of humanity, Amnesty International said today.

A video published online by the media wing of the armed group purports to show the beheadings of 21 Copts, mostly Egyptians, on a beach in an unknown location in the province of Tripoli. The atrocity was carried out in retaliation for the alleged abduction of Camilia Shehata, an Egyptian woman, formerly a Christian, whose conversion to Islam sparked a wave of protests in 2010.

Nothing could justify the cold-blooded murder of the men who appear to have been targeted solely on account of their faith, Amnesty International has said.

The video titled “A message signed with blood to the nation of the cross” shows a group of men dressed in orange jumpsuits who are paraded on the beach by masked men, then forced to kneel, and then beheaded.

According to the archdiocese of Samalut, 20 victims have been identified by their families as Egyptian Copts originally from the district of Samalut in El-Minya Governorate. The identity of the 21st victim who is believed to be a Copt from sub-Saharan Africa has yet to be established.

This atrocious killing and carefully orchestrated video is a vicious act of cruelty aiming at terrorizing people in Libya, Egypt and across the world. Amnesty International has said. It is particularly devastating for the victims’ families who are in a state of utter shock. Amnesty International calls on the Egyptian authorities ensure that they receive the psychological and social support they require, both in the immediate aftermath of this atrocity and on a continuing basis as needed. The Egyptian authorities must act on their promise to deliver financial compensation to the families of the victims who come from poor communities in Upper Egypt and may have lost their breadwinners. Egyptian Coptic Christians have suffered discrimination for decades, particularly in relation to building and maintaining their places of worship, while the Egyptian authorities have failed to protect the community from numerous sectarian attacks.

According to the families of the 20 Egyptian Coptic migrants, they were abducted in two separate incidents in the area of Sirte, in north-western Libya, where they had been living and working. On 29 December 2014, a group of seven Egyptian Copts were stopped at a checkpoint as they were driving towards the Egyptian border and abducted by armed men. On 3 January 2015, a group of armed men stormed a house in Sirte which had been used as a residence by Egyptian workers, including

the seven abducted men, where the assailants abducted 13 other Egyptian Copts based on a list of names, which included Christians only.

The whereabouts of the abducted Egyptian migrant workers had remained unknown until 12 January 2015, when the group calling itself the Tripoli Province of the Islamic State issued a series of photos of the men claiming to be behind the abduction. On 13 February 2015, an online magazine issued by the armed group claimed that the abductions were carried out in reprisal for the alleged persecution of Muslim women, including Camilia Shehata, in Egypt, by the Coptic Church. In 2010, Camilia Shehata, went missing amidst rumours that she had been abducted. She was later found by the Egyptian police and handed over to the church.

Amnesty International is gravely concerned for the safety of seven other Egyptians, most of them Copts, who have gone missing in the area of Sirte and Misratah in recent months. On 25 August 2014, three brothers - Jamal Matta Hakim, Ra'if Matta Hakim and Rumana Matta Hakim – and their cousin, Adel Siddiq Hakim, were abducted at a checkpoint in Sirte. According to another brother, interviewed by Amnesty International, the men had been working in Tripoli, but decided to return to Egypt when the conflict in Libya escalated. They were on their way back to Egypt when their car was stopped by a group of armed, masked men at a checkpoint. Upon inspection of their passports, the four Copts were forced to get out of the vehicle and were taken to an unknown location, while the Muslim passengers were allowed to continue their journey. Their fate and whereabouts have remained unknown since.

The following day, on 26 August 2015, Mina Shahat 'Awad, another Egyptian Copt, was abducted from a checkpoint in Sirte as he too was on his way back to Egypt. His fate and whereabouts have also remained unknown. On 15 September 2014, two other Egyptian men, including a Muslim and a Copt, went missing in the area of Misratah after they left their workplace in a car at about 4:00pm that day.

Amnesty International calls on all armed groups and relevant authorities to intensify their efforts to establish the fate and whereabouts of the seven abducted Egyptian men. Any civilians held on account of their religious, political or tribal identity must be released immediately and unconditionally.

Background

Religious minorities have been increasingly targeted in post al-Gaddafi Libya, and have been subjected to abductions, torture and other ill-treatment, and unlawful killings, particularly in Benghazi and Sirte.

Since the start of the current conflict between loose coalitions of armed groups affiliated with two competing governments and parliaments based respectively in Tobruk and in Tripoli, abductions of civilians on account of their origin, identity or activities, have become commonplace in Libya. Amnesty International has documented several summary killings and other unlawful killings by armed groups in Benghazi, Derna and in Zawiya, including at least one beheading. Information available to Amnesty International suggests that there may have been more beheadings of captured fighters or abducted civilians in Benghazi.

Since the end of the 2011 armed conflict, Sirte has become a stronghold of Islamist armed groups,

including Ansar al-Shari'a, which aims at enforcing its own interpretation of Islamic Law and which has been accused of serious human rights abuses.

In November 2014, a Libyan armed group declared its allegiance to the armed group calling itself Islamic State, and announced the establishing of the Tripoli Province, which includes several cities in the west of the country, including Sirte, Tripoli, Misratah and Zawiya.