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Egypt: Release teacher accused of blasphemy

A Coptic Christian teacher detained in Egypt on charges of “defamation of religion” must be immediately released and the criminal case against her dropped, said Amnesty International today, ahead of her appearance in court on Saturday.

Dimyana Obeid Abd Al Nour, 24, has been in custody since 8 May, when she went to the public prosecution’s office in Luxor to respond to charges of “defamation of religion”. The case against her is based on a complaint lodged by the parents of three of her students alleging that she insulted Islam and the Prophet Muhammad during a class.

The alleged incident took place at the Sheikh Sultan primary school in Tout, Luxor Governorate, on 8 April during a lesson on “religious life”. Dimyana Obeid Abd Al Nour has been teaching at three schools in Luxor since the beginning of this year.

“It is outrageous that a teacher finds herself behind bars for teaching a class. If she made some professional mistake, or deviated from the school curriculum, an internal review should have sufficed,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Middle East and North Africa Programme Director at Amnesty International.

“The authorities must release Dimyana Obeid Abd Al Nour immediately and drop these spurious charges against her.”

According to the information available to Amnesty International, some of the students alleged that Dimyana Obeid Abd Al Nour said that she “loved Father Shenouda”, the late Patriarch of the Egyptian Orthodox Church, and touched her knee or her stomach when she spoke about the Prophet Muhammad in class. She has denied the charges, and maintained that she stuck to the school curriculum.

After a number of parents allegedly made verbal complaints, the school and the local Department of Education apparently launched their own internal investigations. At the Department of Education, Dimyana Obeid Abd Al Nour was told to refrain from teaching in schools, pending the outcome of the investigation. Until her detention, she continued going to the Department of Education and receiving a salary.

In recent months, Amnesty International received numerous reports of individuals accused and convicted of blasphemy in Egypt. In some instances, accusations are levelled against bloggers or media professionals whose ideas are “deemed offensive”.

On 25 January, a Cairo court upheld a lower court’s verdict against another Coptic Christian, Alber Saber Ayyad, sentencing him to three years’ imprisonment for “defamation of religion”, in relation to videos and other material he posted online which the court deemed “offensive”.

In other cases, in particular in Upper Egypt, blasphemy accusations have been levelled against Coptic

Christians, including several other teachers.

On 11 May, another Coptic Christian is due to appear in court in the Governorate of Assiut on charges of “defamation of religion”, allegedly based on a conversation he had with a group of Muslims, who later accused him of insulting Islam.

On numerous occasions, Amnesty International has called on the Egyptian authorities not to prosecute individuals based on blasphemy laws which criminalize criticism of or insult to religious beliefs.

“It is not a crime to speak one’s mind on a religion, whether it is their own or that of someone else. Any laws barring such speech violate freedom of expression, and are in breach of Egypt’s international obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.