

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Egypt: Amnesty International condemns deadly attack on church in Alexandria, calls for improved protection ahead of Coptic Christmas

Amnesty International strongly condemns the bomb attack perpetrated in the early hours of 1 January 2011 which targeted worshippers at a Coptic Christian church in Alexandria, killing 23 and injuring scores of others during a New Year midnight service. Amnesty International is calling on the Egyptian authorities to take comprehensive measures to protect Coptic Christians ahead of their celebration of Christmas on 7 January 2011.

The bombing targeted the al-Qidissin (the Saints) Church in the area of Sidi Basher in the city of Alexandria. While no one has claimed responsibility for the attack, the authorities have said it is the result of a suicide bombing linked to al-Qa'ida and they are holding seven suspects for questioning in connection with the blast.

Amnesty International's thoughts and sympathy are first and foremost with those who have become the victims of this attack. The organization condemns all deliberate attacks against civilians, which can never be justified under any circumstances. Such attacks are absolutely prohibited under international law and show a complete disregard for the right to life.

Amnesty International calls on the investigation launched by the Egyptian authorities to be thorough and impartial and urges them to identify those responsible for the bombing, and to ensure justice, truth and reparation for the victims and their relatives. This will only be possible if the Egyptian authorities abide by their international human rights obligations.

Victims and their families have a right to know the truth about the bombing, including the individuals or groups responsible for carrying it out or ordering it. They also need to know the extent to which the authorities failed in their duty to protect them and the reasons behind such failure. Only an investigation and trial of the alleged perpetrators adhering to international standards can answer the questions of the victims and their families and ensure their right to justice and redress.

Following the attack, Egyptians – including Muslims and Copts – demonstrated in a number of governorates to condemn the attack and express solidarity with the victims and their families. The authorities were reported to have prevented some demonstrations from taking place, in particular in Alexandria.

Saturday's attack also sparked anger amongst Copts and other Egyptians who took to the streets in Alexandria, Cairo, Qalyubiya and other governorates calling for more protection and justice. Protestors clashed with the security forces in Alexandria, who used tear gas and fired rubber bullets to disperse the crowds.

Some demonstrators were injured in Monday's clashes in Shobra, a district in north Cairo, as shown by footage available on social network and video-sharing websites. Official sources said that at least 14 members of the security forces had also sustained a number of injuries. Eight protestors, including Mustafa Shawqi; Mohamed Nagi; Mustafa Muheiddin; Amr Ahmed Hassan; Tamer al-Saydi; Ahmed Refaat; and Mohamed Atef; were arrested and referred by the prosecution for trial tomorrow in the Rod El Farag court of misdemeanours on a number of charges, including destruction of public and private property; assault on police officers; and causing unrest and disorder.

Amnesty International calls on the Egyptian authorities to ensure that such measures are not now used to prevent Egyptians from peacefully expressing their solidarity with the victims or their families. The organization also calls on the authorities not to prosecute anyone simply for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of assembly and to ensure that any others are granted a fair trial.

Amnesty International recognizes the right of the authorities to maintain public order but this must be done in accordance with the law and the conditions of necessity and proportionality set out in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which Egypt is a state party. However, undue restrictions and sweeping measures have routinely been used by the Egyptian authorities to quash the legitimate exercise of the rights to peaceful protest and assembly in violation of Article 21 of the ICCPR which guarantees the right to freedom of assembly.

Many in Egypt, including among the Coptic community, feel that previous incidents and recent threats were not addressed appropriately by the authorities, increasing the tension between the authorities and the Copts.

In November 2010, security forces used excessive force against Coptic Christians protesting the authorities' denial of permission to construct a church in Giza. During the protests security forces killed two people and dozens were detained or injured. The Public Prosecutor ordered the detention of 154 protestors pending further investigations, before releasing all without charge. The last 23 still held were released by the Public Prosecutor on 4 January 2011.

Copts in Egypt have repeatedly complained that the Egyptian authorities are not doing enough to protect them or prosecute their attackers and those brought to justice often receive light sentences. In a number of incidents, the authorities have favoured "reconciliation" over the prosecution of offenders as a way to tackle attacks against Copts or sectarian clashes.

Amnesty International is also concerned that, in breach with Article 18 of the ICCPR which guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the Egyptian authorities have failed in their promise to end discriminatory practices preventing Copts from building houses of worship and urges the authorities to put an end to all discriminatory laws and practices faced by religious minorities.

In light of the attack in Alexandria and last year's drive-by shooting as worshippers were leaving a church in the city of Nagaa Hammadi, which left seven people dead, Amnesty International is urging the Egyptian authorities to take comprehensive measures to protect the Coptic minority ahead of Friday's Coptic Christmas mass and to ensure that Copts can fully enjoy human rights free from discrimination.

Background

■ Public Statement, [Egypt: Egyptian authorities failing to protect religious minorities](#) (Index: MDE 12/001/2010), 12 January 2010.