# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
# PUBLIC STATEMENT

**12 January 2010**
**AI Index: MDE 12/001/2010**

## Egypt: Egyptian authorities failing to protect religious minorities

Amnesty International today condemned the drive-by shooting on 6 January that killed seven individuals and injured dozens of others in the south of the country in an attack directed against Egypt's Coptic minority. In light of the repeated threats against Copts in Egypt, the organization called on the Egyptian authorities to initiate a credible investigation into the shooting and to take measures to protect religious minorities from such attacks.

The shooting took place as worshipers were leaving a church in the city of Nagaa Hammadi, in Upper Egypt, after a midnight mass on Coptic Christmas Eve on 6 January. Six worshipers and a police officer, reportedly off duty, were killed. The Egyptian authorities announced on 8 January that that they are holding three people in connection with the attack.

According to reports, the attack was in reprisal for the alleged rape of a 12-year-old Muslim girl by a Christian man in November 2009. Following news of the alleged rape hundreds of Muslim protestors torched Christian-owned shops in the town of Farshout, near Nagaa Hammadi. A Christian man has been arrested over the alleged rape of the girl and is reported to be in custody awaiting trial.

Although there were threats that further attacks against Copts will be carried out in Nagaa Hammadi, following unrest in the region in November 2009, the Egyptian authorities seem to have failed to provide adequate protection and to increase security measures. There was a noticeable absence of security forces that are customarily deployed during festivities to guard churches and the surrounding areas and to limit traffic in nearby streets.

Last week's shooting is the deadliest attack against Copts since the 2000 attack which killed at least 20 people in Kosheh village in Sohag Governorate, some 500 km south of Cairo.

On 7 January, several hundreds of Christian protestors gathered in front of the morgue where the dead bodies were being kept and chanted anti-government slogans. They clashed with the security forces who fired tear gas to disperse the crowd. Copts often complain the Egyptian authorities are not doing enough to protect them or prosecute their attackers and those brought to justice often receive light sentences.

In addition, clashes broke out between Muslims and Copts in a number of nearby villages, including in Bahgoura, 3km from Nagaa Hammadi, where dozens of shops and several houses owned by Copts were burned down. An elderly woman who was trapped in one of the houses set on fire died of suffocation. According to official reports, 28 Copts and 12 Muslims were arrested in connection with the clashes.

Communal violence between Christians and Muslims often erupts following family or personal quarrels. Amnesty International and Egyptian human rights organizations have monitored an increase of sectarian attacks against the Coptic Christian community, comprising between 6 and 8 million people in Egypt,

Amnesty International is urging the Egyptian authorities to take positive measures to ensure that the right to personal safety and integrity of Copts and other religious minorities is upheld and that suspects are brought to justice in proceedings that conform to international standards for fair trial and without recourse to the death penalty.

Egypt is obliged under international human rights law to ensure the protection of racial or religious groups or individuals belonging to them, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Egypt is a party, guarantees the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of one's choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching. In addition, the UN Human Rights Committee which oversee the implementation of the ICCPR specified in its General Comment on Article 2 that "the positive obligations on States Parties to ensure Covenant rights will only be fully discharged if individuals are protected by the State, not just against violations of Covenant rights by its agents, but also against acts committed by private persons or entities that would impair the enjoyment of Covenant rights in so far as they are amenable to application between private persons or entities".

The recent attack against Copts in Egypt is a stark reminder of the need for the Egyptian authorities to do more to protect religious minorities and to this effect they should immediately facilitate the outstanding request to visit Egypt of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

**Background:**
Other religious minorities have also been targeted in Egypt. In April 2009, the homes of several Baha'i families in al-Shuraniyya village in Sohag Governorate were burned down by local inhabitants following a call by a journalist in the government-owned al-Goumhuria, inciting hatred and violence against Baha'is in a televised programme and newspaper articles. A number of Baha'is were forced to flee their homes because of the ensuing violence. Six human rights organizations issued a joint statement in which they urged the Public Prosecutor to open an investigation into the assault and to prosecute the al-Goumhuria journalist. While the investigation initiated by the Public Prosecution into the incitement of hatred is ongoing, no one is known to have been arrested in connection with the attack against the Bahai's homes in Sohag.