

Egyptian Christians reeling after deadly attack on Massgoers

PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE

WITH record freezing temperatures ruining travel plans for many Brits this January, the somewhat warmer climes of the Middle East seem a tempting option.

However, in Egypt and Iran, the new year has brought with it far more pressing concerns than the weather, particularly for minority Christian groups such as the Copts.

Fresh incidents of irreligious prejudice and violence have sadly stained the memory of Coptic Christmas celebrations in Egypt with eerie predictability.

Suspected Muslim gunmen shot six Coptic Christians and a security official in Nag Hamadi, Qena, as they left midnight Mass at the Church of St John on January 7.

The drive-by shooting has since sparked riots and protests all over the world on behalf of minority Copts.

Some news reports say the incident was retaliation for an alleged rape of a Muslim girl by a Coptic man last year, but many Orthodox Copts say this type of violence has happened too many times before.

Bishop Kirolos from the Coptic Church told *Christian Solidarity Worldwide* (CSW) there have been threats against Copts in the months leading up to Christmas.

According to a BBC news report the bishop even took the precaution of ending Mass an hour earlier than normal, but despite all this, attackers still managed to take the police who were guarding the church by surprise.

CSW seeks to raise further awareness about the discrimination and persecution against Christians in

Muslim majority Egypt.

As a major tourist destination and a crucial ally of the international community on a host of issues, Egypt's position is significant.

In April 2009, the Egyptian Government's decision to cull all pigs in response to the H1N1 Virus pandemic left Christian communities without an income, as many depended on pig rearing for their livelihood.

Furthermore, between July and August 2009, *Watani* newspaper and various Egyptian NGOs reported seven attacks on Coptic properties in Upper Egypt.

Copts make up ten per cent of the 80 million population.

However, these religiously motivated attacks are not only directed at the Coptic community.

Adherents of the Baha'i faith have been singled out for violence as Baha'i locals in Sohag were forced to leave town in 2009 after Molotov cocktails were thrown at their houses.

Unless the Egyptian Government tackles the structural and social basis of the inter-faith tensions in Egypt and seeks to actively promote a culture of tolerance and equality, rooted in consistent application of the law, it seems Egypt will continue to suffer from this terrible communal violence.

Similarly, in the not-so-distant nation of Iran, inter-faith tensions continue to cause violent disturbances to the lives of religious minorities.

Compass Direct news reports that a 10-year-old girl with a kidney condition is at home in Mashad with her Christian convert mother who is under house arrest.

The mother was detained alongside at least five others from Iranian house churches.

Middle East Concern says the sick girl will be forced to leave under a custody order for foster care as soon as she gets better.

Meanwhile, the family have been ordered to stop believing in Christ and stop speaking publicly about their faith.

Although the girl's family are legally entitled to representation under Iranian law, they have been denied access to a lawyer.

Apostates – those who renounce the Islamic faith in Iran – are often subject to gross and wide-ranging human rights abuses.

Although the Koran does not prescribe a temporal punishment for apostasy, the vast majority of traditional Islamic theology advocates the death penalty for a male apostate and life-long imprisonment for a female apostate.

CSW's prayers are with the families of all victims of religious violence in the Middle East.

Please join us in prayer as we urge the Egyptian and Iranian authorities to address these human right abuses in 2010 and seek to establish a climate where freedom of religion and belief for all is protected.

■ For more information on the Coptic crisis please go to www.csw.org.uk





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Living in fear – Egyptian Christians shout slogans and hold placards during a protest in Cairo to condemn a drive-by shooting that killed six Christians in Nag Hamadi in southern Egypt. Gunmen opened fire on a crowd of worshippers leaving a church after midnight Mass for the Coptic Orthodox Christmas on January 7.