

Can Christians Celebrate This Christmas in Egypt?

Tensions are running high for Christians in Egypt as they prepare to celebrate the Christmas holiday. Jan. 7 is the date on which many Eastern Orthodox churches, following the Julian or Alexandrian calendars, mark the birth of Jesus. After a year of incredible persecution, Egyptian Christians are fearful but cautiously hopeful as they look to the future both for Egypt and the church.

"This Christmas my family and I don't feel the happiness of every Christmas before because of the bad current events and our bad circumstances," Abdullah Ghaly, a 44-year-old carpenter from Assiut, told International Christian Concern (ICC).

"The situation is so bad nowadays in **Egypt**. Every day we hear about bad events like explosions in some places, Christians abducted for ransom or attacks on Churches," Farid*, a Christian from Cairo, told ICC.

"On New Year's Eve the supporters of the **Muslim Brotherhood** killed a Christian young man in the front of St. George Church during their march on the street in front of the church," Farid continued.

A video from MidEast Christian News shows the ammunition used on the Copts who were in front of the church to protect it. Ihab Ghattas Tawadros, 23, died after being shot in the head on New Year's Eve outside the St. George Church in Ain Shams, confirms Dr. Hisham Abdul Hamid, spokesman for the Forensic Medical Authority.

Just days before Christmas, security forces arrested members of a terrorist cell that was believed to be planning to attack churches on Christmas Eve, Amany Moussa of Copts United says.

Christmas Eve services Monday passed without major incident.

"I was glued to my chair until the midnight Christmas Mass ended with no major events, despite the threats from the Brotherhood and its allies," Hal Meawad, secretary of the rights group **Coptic** Solidarity, told ICC.

With these threats and the violence directed at Copts during the past few months, security forces seem to be taking the protection of churches seriously.

Maj. Gen. Abdel Fattah Othman, the interior minister's media and PR assistant, says every church will have a separate protection plan and that the ministry of interior has "taken unprecedented measures to secure churches." These plans include having guards present to surround the churches and prevent any vehicles to park near them, MidEast Christian News reports.

Plainclothes officers and counterterrorism specialists will be on the streets near churches, along with combat units on roving patrols. Bigger teams will be deployed to the country's largest churches.

"If police confirm there is a presence of any terrorist elements, they will use live rounds," an Interior Ministry official speaking on condition of anonymity told Reuters.

The greater amount of protection being given to Christians by the Egyptian security forces is a welcome change from the relative inattention shown this summer as violence against Christians was at a level not seen for centuries.

Christians Cautiously Optimistic for the Future

Asked about their feelings for the future, **Egyptian Christians** are realistic about the persecution they are facing and the effect of the violence of the past three years, but they also show some signs of optimism about the future both for

Christians and for the country.

"This Christmas has been the worst season," Magdy Hor, a 37-year-old tourist shop owner from Minya, told ICC. "The numbers of tourists coming to Egypt are few compared to the past. The tourists are afraid to come because they hear bad news about what is happening in Egypt."

"We don't know where Egypt will go," he continued. "We hope that after choosing a new president in Egypt, the situation will change for the better and Egypt will be a good country and its economy will improve. We hope that."

"Egypt is in the hands of God," Waseem Gad, from Minya, told ICC. "The military and police will beat the terrorism soon, and Egypt will be the land of peace and security like before."

"Personally, I'm cautiously optimistic," Meawad says. "I don't expect the culture of hatred to change overnight, especially that some of its promoters are allowed access to the media. Yaser Borhami, a prominent leader of the Salafi Al-nour Party, just came out with a fatwa prohibiting Muslims to express any goodwill wishes to the Christians for Christmas, saying that this is *haram* [forbidden in Islam]."

"The new draft of the constitution is an improvement over the Brotherhood constitution of 2012," Meawad continues. "However, the infamous Article 2, declaring the principles of Shariah to be the primary source for legislation, is still there like a sword drawn and can be used against non-Muslims at any time and in any situation. All accepted that draft, as it is the best possible and could have been much worse."

A new constitution does not erase the reality of human rights violations. It is still a long road for Egypt to walk. The changes made in the constitution are only small steps forward, but they are important ones, and they have come at a high cost.

“The Copts footed the bill of change with their blood and property,” Meawad says. “After the June 30 uprising, 86 of their churches were burned and destroyed. The armed forces promised to rebuild every single one, but action is very slow. However, I’m not complaining, because the army actually rebuilt one church in the province of Minia. Small as it is, this is a giant step, which gives us a strong hope that better days are ahead for our brethren Copts in Egypt.”

As Christians celebrate the birth of Christ, we hope that the declaration of the angels to the shepherds outside Bethlehem would be true in Egypt: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

**Name changed for security purposes.*

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