

Egyptian Military Imprisons Christians to Cover Up Massacre

The convictions of two Coptic Christians on Monday for stealing weapons from soldiers during a 2011 protest is the latest attempt by the Egyptian military to cover up their involvement in a massacre that left more than two dozen Copts dead, Christians say.

Maikel Adel Naguib Farag and Maikel Mossad Shaker were sentenced to three years in prison by a criminal court in Egypt on February 4 for possessing a military machine gun during a deadly demonstration in the Maspero district of Cairo on Oct. 9, 2011, that resulted in the death of 27 people, mostly Christians. The initially peaceful protest denouncing the demolition of a church in Aswan a week earlier was met by the worst violence in Egypt since President Hosni Mubarak's ouster from power in February 2011. Video footage captured on cell phones showed armored military vehicles running over demonstrators and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) opening fire on crowds.

The SCAF, however, has denied responsibility, instead, accusing the two Christians of stealing weapons from soldiers and then firing at them, causing the soldiers and vehicles to panic. But Christians in Egypt believe the men were framed to conceal the SCAF's role in what later became known as the Maspero Massacre.

"The military is trying to cover up this massacre," Wagih Yacoub, a Coptic human rights activist, told International Christian Concern (ICC). "They know they committed a huge mistake which became an international incident. They want to justify what they did by blaming the protestors and trying to

give a bad image of the Copts. Even if Farag and Shaker had taken the weapons, what were they suppose to do? It was self defense. The military was shooting at them. Should they just stand there?"

Christian rights groups are also concerned about the fairness and transparency of Farag and Shaker's trial. "The men appear to have been convicted on very little evidence," reported Christian Solidarity Worldwide. "For example, Farag was initially arrested at his home on Nov. 3, 2011. Prosecutors claimed that the taxi driver who had driven him home had seen him carrying a gun bundled in a plastic bag. After his home was searched, he was reportedly beaten and taken away in his underwear. The only evidence brought against him at trial was the word of the taxi driver."

Justice Denied

To date, no top-ranking military officials have been held responsible for the massacre and only three soldiers have been sentenced with short prison terms on charges of involuntary manslaughter for their role in the deaths of 14 protestors. Yet, no one has been charged for killing the remaining victims, most of whom died from gunshot wounds, despite denials by the SCAF that it used live ammunition.

The soldiers' convictions have done little to ease the minds of Christian victims. "We live in torture each passing day for the loss of our families," George Mosaad, the son of Mosaad Mahny Mosaad, who died in the Maspero Massacre, told *Daily News Egypt*. "What adds to our torture is that justice has still not been served for those victims. The average Egyptians should always remember that innocent souls had taken to the streets demanding their rights only to be met by attacks from the army they thought would protect them."

More than a year later, Christians are still waiting for justice. "The moment I saw my brother laying on the ground

covered with blood, after he was run over by an armored military vehicle, fails to leave my memory," Wael Bishay, whose brother Ayman was killed during the protest, told Ahram Online. "I will fight till my last breath to see justice for all in Egypt."

There is little hope among Christians in Egypt that justice will someday prevail or that their security will improve. "These are the martyrs of these times and we can't forget them," said Metropolitan Pachomious, a former patriarch of the Coptic Church, during a gathering that commemorated the one-year anniversary of the massacre. "We are living a new era of martyrdom."