

Kidnapping and Police Brutality Plague Egypt's Christians

It's been two months since Coptic Christians in an Upper Egypt village endured a traumatic sequence of events ending in heavy police abuse. The victims still have not received any justice from the state security authorities who broke the law and violated its citizen's human rights.

On Sept. 16, in Deir Gabal al-Teir village, Egyptian security forces ambushed several Coptic homes in the middle of the night. They proceeded to steal and destroy the families' belongings before dragging dozens of residents out of their beds, binding their hands behind their backs and beating them with batons. The police then proceeded to drag them to the police station by a single rope.

The security forces collectively punished the villagers in response to a demonstration initiated by a group of Copts the previous day. They were protesting outside the station to pressure the police to investigate the disappearance that initially occurred nearly two weeks earlier, of 39-year-old Coptic woman Iman Morqos Saroufim.

Her family initially filed a police report on Sept. 3, believing that she was kidnapped by Muslim Sami Ahmed Abd al-Rahman. They responded saying they were unable to help, declaring that they believed Saroufim ran away willingly, and that since leaving she had also converted to Islam.

After two weeks of her friends and families' unsuccessful negotiations with security and executive leaders of the province, hundreds from her Coptic community organized a demonstration outside the police station. The protest turned violent, leaving a police vehicle and a civil defense vehicle

with broken windshields.

The police used tear gas to disperse the protestors, and then proceeded to raid their village late that night.

On Sept. 26, Saroufim unexpectedly returned to her family and told the media that she had “escaped.”

Speaking with Mideast Christian News (MCN), she said that a Muslim man abducted her. “He tried to force me to go with him to Al-Azhar to convert to Islam, but I refused. He took another veiled woman to Al-Azhar, pretending she was me, to change my religion. He managed to change my religion using my photo.”

Despite the collective punishment, no police were charged for the attack.

“The police brutality in this situation is similar to attacks under the former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s time. It’s the same old thing,” a Cairo pastor told World Watch Monitor.

In a meeting between Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim and a Coptic delegation from the Minya governorate on Sept. 23, Ibrahim promised to compensate the owners of the homes for any damages.

Editor Youssef Sidhom of Watani International said he was not satisfied with this type of response, “A non-biased investigation is needed into the brutal police response to the wrathful protest of the Coptic villagers against police failure—rather, inaction—to find the missing woman and bring her home.”

“The way the police handled the events cannot be merely brushed over. It implies that we accept the police going back to their previous savagery and horror practices,” Sidhom said.

Moktar Younan, a Copt from Deir Gabal al-Teir, told MCN On Oct. 5, “The residents of the village are waiting decision of

the government on compensating them for the damage occurred to them, due to the attack committed against them after the disappearance of Saroufim.”

Soon after Saroufim’s return, the Samalout Coptic Orthodox diocese said that she returned to her family out of her own free will. The church asked the community and media to stop talking about the case, stating, “We hope that everyone stops talking about this matter and leaves it to the legitimate channels of the state.”

Collective Punishment With Impunity

The Egyptian police’s use of this form of collective punishment with impunity against entire communities is common practice.

“If some demonstrators attacked police personnel and hurled stones at them, then it is a transgression that needs to be addressed in accordance to the law. But in no way does it justify the use of collective punishment on the village, use of excessive violence and engaging in degrading practices,” said Ishak Ibrahim, an officer for the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, EIPR.

On Oct. 2, EIPR urged the public prosecutor to launch an investigation into allegations against the police and into allegations made by Saroufim against the Interior Ministry.

“The unfortunate events that took place in Deir Gabal al-Teir revealed the roots of the main problem, which is the absence of a clear policy and specific laws to guarantee the freedom of faith, regardless of what it is, and the freedom of citizens to change their religion whenever they want,” said EIPR in its press release.

“It is the state’s responsibility to resolve sectarian disputes following the principle of the rule of law, without engaging in collective punishment, customary law or other

methods that do not indicate respect for the citizenship rights of religious minorities,” EIPR said.

Kidnapping of Copts Is “Big Business”

In terms of the long-recurring issue of kidnapped Christian women, Ebram Louis believes that demonstrations are the only method to force police to take any action to return these women.

Louis, the founder of the Association for the Victims of Abductions and Enforced Disappearances told MCN on Oct. 17 that the position of Egyptian police is biased against Christians whose daughters have been kidnapped by Muslims.

Police are notorious for not acting, he said, even if the girl has been missing for 24 hours and the family has been threatened for ransom, “because they are afraid of the militant groups.”

“They did not even follow up phone calls, identify identities of the callers or arrest perpetrators. The police have not helped the families of the kidnapped girls at all. Moreover, some police officers told the families not to search for their kidnapped daughters, as they converted to the right religion,” Louis said.

Without any protection it is especially easy for kidnappers to target members of rich Egyptian families, to extort their families for ransom. “Copts are still suffering from the incidents of kidnapping for ransom,” EIPR’s Ibrahim emphasized to MCN in an Oct. 18 report.