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The Right Honorable Gordon Brown Prime Minister
10 Downing Street,
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Dear Mr. Brown

On 6 January this year - which represents Christmas Eve for the Christian Coptic Orthodox community in Egypt - seven Christian worshippers were machine gunned to death by Muslim extremists outside their church in the town of Naga Hamady in Upper Egypt.

These victims, some of them teenagers, had just finished celebrating Christmas mass. An unarmed Muslim security guard was also killed in the attack and several others injured.

This senseless and barbaric act of violence would of itself evoke shock and grief were it an isolated incident. Lamentably, however, it is not an isolated incident but yet another stark example of the cycle of persecution, intimidation and violence targeting Christian Egyptians that has been escalating ceaselessly over the past 30 years under the incumbent Egyptian government.

Coptic Orthodox Christians are the indigenous population of Egypt who can trace their heritage back to the pharaohs. This community has been an intrinsic part of Egypt's rich civilisation and cultural identity without interruption since 42AD. In fact, the word "Egypt" derives from the word "Copt", such is the inextricable link between country and people. Nonetheless, the Copts have survived persecution and discrimination in their own homeland for the past 1400 years and to this day, such that the group now represents a minority of around 12-

15 per cent of the population of Egypt. Over the past three decades, the threat to the very existence of this ancient people has become increasingly sinister - primarily as a result of the rising wave of Islamic fundamentalism that has been engulfing the country over this period, which has essentially gone unchecked by the Egyptian government.

Christians are unashamedly discriminated against on every level. Career progression is notoriously difficult if you are a Christian in Egypt: for example, not one single Christian numbers amongst the deans of any university or college, there are no Christian chiefs of police, or high ranking Christian officers in the army, air force, or navy, not a single Christian amongst the policy makers in supreme councils (for example, Christians in the ranks of the judiciary are about 1%). There is one elected Member of Parliament out of 444, one district governor appointed recently out of 29 as a publicity exercise. Bureaucratic hurdles for Christians are purposely obstructive: planning permission to change the position of or repair a toilet in a church can take an inordinate amount of time to process that the need is now so great that you can hardly find a place to stand inside a church on a Sunday yet mosques spring up frequently next to churches, seemingly any need for compliance with planning regulations are hurried and made easy. Besides the discrimination, the violence against Christians has increased in recent years.

Since the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt over the past 38 years, Copts have suffered over 160 serious attacks on homes, businesses and churches. There have been increasing incidences of abduction and forcible marriage of young Christian girls to Muslim men and the intimidation and forcible conversions to Islam of entire families, particularly in the poorer regions of Upper Egypt. On the other hand, conversions to Christianity are necessarily clandestine for fear of certain torture or death. Over 400 people have been murdered yet none of the perpetrators has been sentenced. One tactic which the police are beginning to use lately is to arrest Christians on false allegations in order to use them later as bargaining chips to force a reconciliation session.

These so called "reconciliation sessions" are a ruse to distract from the real reason for the seething unrest that is gripping Egypt: that is the adoption radical teaching of Islam, which preaches hatred and the annihilation of "infidels" or any belief or lifestyle that goes against this fundamentalist teaching.

After this latest attack at Naga Hammady, the official line announced by the Egyptian government through state-run news agencies was that this was a random, isolated incident committed by a group of

individuals in retaliation for the alleged rape of a Muslim girl by a Christian man one month previously.

Notwithstanding that no evidence has been produced to support this allegation, the Egyptian government's version of events has been accepted by the few media outlets who chose to report it, without question or independent verification.

The aftermath of this attack has left the international Coptic community (and all those who have been following the human rights abuses in Egypt) aghast. First, we are appalled that yet another act of murderous violence has been committed against Christians outside a place of worship and that, yet again, the government machine has done nothing to publicly condemn the violence. Three suspects have been apprehended in connection with the attack but, from bitter experience, we hold little hope that these individuals will be sentenced or that justice will be served. We are deeply grieved and saddened by the taking of innocent life but what is more alarming and gives us greater cause for concern for the safety of those that are left behind is that (1) those news agencies that have elected to report this outrage in passing have conveyed distorted facts from an unreliable source, namely, the Egyptian government and (2) the mainstream media has chosen to ignore the incident altogether.

We cannot emphasise enough that this barbaric incident is far from isolated; this latest atrocity forms an integral part of the hellish cycle of persecution calculated to bring an end to the Christian presence in Egypt.

Matters are coming to a head: it is glaringly apparent that the Egyptian state system is offering no protection to this vulnerable minority against a slow and systematic holocaust by a determined fundamentalist Muslim contingent. In fact, the Egyptian government, at best, is turning a blind eye to the repeated and growing outrages committed against the Christians. More disturbingly, it is arguable that the government is secretly complicit in these crimes: each of the outrages perpetrated against Christians in Egypt has been documented by Coptic charities and other human rights organisations and at each of these crime scenes, it has been noted that police are eerily absent and subsequently, justice has been elusive.

The world media has largely ignored the plight of the Christians in Egypt and their ongoing persecution. It is high time that the Western media finally took note of these crimes against humanity perpetrated against one of the most ancient and peace-loving communities of civilisation. The glossing over or - worse still - complete ignorance of these atrocities must come to an end if we in the Western world

consider ourselves truly to value the basic human rights of freedom of religion, family life and life itself.

Today we say enough is enough. Copts have lived in Egypt for thousands of years: it is the birthright of every citizen of every nation state to live in peace and dignity, to be treated equally and to have his human rights protected by the state.

We kindly ask the British government to pay more attention to what is happening in Egypt, to pressurise the Egyptian government to observe the universally accepted standards of human rights and to publicly condemn this cowardly attack and the ongoing persecution of Egyptian Christians in their homeland. In particular, we require the Egyptian government to pledge that it will uphold the following basic rights and freedoms for the Christians:

- (1) Restrictions on the construction and repairs of churches to be lifted;
- (2) Christians to receive fair representation in legislative councils;
- (3) the glass ceiling restricting the progression of Christians towards senior positions in government office, the army, police and other institutions to be removed;
- (4) Crimes against Christians to be investigated promptly and perpetrators prosecuted in accordance with due process;
- (5) Criminalise incitement to violence and hate preaching against "infidels" currently taking place in mosques and being televised on state-run television;
- (6) The separation of state and religion.

Yours sincerely

For United Copts GB