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**Effective mechanisms for solutions to problems involving
Minorities, including conflict prevention and resolution**

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*CEOHR is committed to constructive dialogue based on the importance of the role of Civil
Society in assisting States to honor their international human rights commitments.*

1. Recurrence and escalation of violence against the Copts

Individual and mass attacks on the Copts started in the early 1970s. In response to these early incidents, a parliamentary committee issued a report in which specific recommendations were submitted to the government aiming at tackling the causes of sectarian strife. Of these recommendations, the most important one was applying same rules and regulations on building places of worship of all faith-communities. Up till now, none of the recommendations then presented was acted upon by the Egyptian authorities.

Escalation of attacks coincided with the rise of political Islam in the 1980s where some Coptic communities in the Delta and Upper Egypt were completely destroyed and six massacres took place in the past two decades. Despite the alarming recurrence of killings of Copts and the destruction of their property, consecutive Egyptian governments have not even cared to properly investigate the roots nor did it try to take any effective measure to stop these sectarian attacks or provide compensations to the victims.

In most of these attacks none of the perpetrators was brought to justice, and if there was anyone indicted, the sentence was astonishingly lenient.

For all sectarian attacks against Copts over more than 34 years, no parliamentary commission was created to investigate the causes of religious strife.

Recently, it seems that the struggle between the ruling National Democratic Party and the Islamic movement in Egypt started to have its more ominous effect on the situation of the Coptic minority. The escalation of attacks on Copts since last year's violent national elections starkly points to such alarming reality. Now, the issue became more complicated. It is more than a dispute between a Copt and Muslim in the market place or on whether Copts were worshipping in a licensed church or not!

Since time does permit to give a full report on sectarian incidents, I will make a quick reference to the scope of sectarian violence over the past year, where in October violence erupted in different areas; from Alexandria in the north to Luxor in the south, leaving behind several dead, scores injured, and a number of churches and Coptic property destroyed.

The ferocity of the violence that had engulfed Alexandria in October and revisited later in April of this year shocked the country and prompted leading intellectuals to criticize the government for its failure to address the root causes of anti-Coptic violence. The editor of Al-Ahram daily warned: "The events in Alexandria serve as a wakeup call. They tell us, in no uncertain terms, that there has been a fundamental shift in the dynamics governing Muslim-Coptic relations in Egypt. A long history of trust is under threat. It has somehow been eroded while we were looking away". He added: "The government must revise educational curricula and examine the performance of the media. It must scrutinize religious discourse, both Muslim and Coptic, expunging anything that smacks of bigotry and bias, and replace them with healthier notions."

2. Inequality before the Law and political marginalization

Although the Copts represent between 10 to 15% of the population, their presence in the legislative National Assembly is reduced to about 1%. In the parliamentary elections of last year, out of 444 elected parliamentarians, only one was a Copt. Initially, their nomination by political parties as candidates for parliamentary elections has been insignificant, if nominated at all.

Egypt's governments have since 1952 attempted to partly redress the imbalance of female and Coptic representation by appointing five women and five Copts to fill the 10 parliamentary slots reserved for presidential appointees. But this only means that most women and Copts in

Parliament are personally beholden to a president and don't represent any constituency. The sad truth is that in Egypt today many Muslims simply do not vote for Christians or women. (Nazila Ghanea, *The Copts, the Middle East in "State of the World's Minorities 2006,"* London: Minority Rights Groups International), p. 176)

As far as their place in public service is concerned, Copts have been excluded from most senior posts. There were no Christians serving as governors but one in the early seventies and another one appointed last year for the province of Qena in Upper Egypt, where sectarian violence against Copts was lately instigated by members of the ruling party in the village of Odayssat.

No Copt has ever been employed in the presidential administration, the State Intelligence apparatus, or as police commissioners, city mayors, public university presidents or deans. There were few Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces. Discrimination against Christians also continued in public sector employment, particularly in the diplomatic corps, the judiciary, and in staff appointments to public universities. Copts are flagrantly excluded from post-graduate scholarships and discriminated against in career promotions.

They also did not enjoy equality before the law, as shown in the cases where they were victims of acts of sectarian violence. Even as victims of massacres that took place in the eighties (Al-Zawiya Al-Hamrah, where scores of Copts were killed and property were looted or destroyed, or the massacres of Abou Qurqas or Samalout in the nineties or the killing of 21 Christians in al-Kush in early 2000. After years of pursuing the legal process, all suspects were acquitted, and no compensation has been paid in the majority of cases. It is shameful to mention that, under Islamic traditional law, even the testimony of a Copt against a Muslim defendant is not accepted at a modern Egyptian court of law.

3. Discrimination in Education and Employment

Copts are excluded from even secondary level appointments within the state administration and public education. Income from taxation is used for funding confessional Islamic education as well as building and restoring mosques, while Christian places of worship and the failing Coptic cultural institution do not receive any public funding.

Discrimination against the Copts in employment pushes them to tempt their chances in the insecure private business or migration, despite strong attachment to their country. Approximately two million Copts live abroad: mostly in the US, Canada, Australia, Europe, and the Arabian Gulf.

4. Segregated Education System

Beside the public education system starting from elementary level to university, which is opened to all Egyptians, the State established in 1961 a parallel Islamic one, where only Muslims can be admitted. The curricula of this Islamic system consist of the same science and letters subjects, taught at the civil educational institutions, in addition to Islamic subjects such as Islamic history, Quran, hadith, exegetes, jurisprudence, and theology. Today Al-Azhar University, which is part of this segregated system, has 70 faculties with 400,000 students, thousands of them come from foreign Muslim countries from around the world, and the whole system is funded by the state.

When Copts attempted to found a university similar to that Islamic system but open to people of different faiths, they were told that their project was of sectarian nature. On the other hand, none of the Coptic cultural institutions is funded by the government.

5. Suppression of Coptic Culture

Copts have a culture of their own, which is rooted in the legacy of the ancient Egyptian tradition, language and their Christian faith, all proudly lived for two millennia. Copts and many Muslim Egyptians share in enjoying this culture as a common human and national heritage. Copts also cherish Muslim customs that does not conflict with their faith. However, Coptic culture, which is studied and appreciated by world academic institutions is completely ignored and excluded from Egyptian university curricula, despite the fact that Egyptology and Islamic archeology have prominent place in Egypt's learning and research institutions.

For nearly 30 years, Coptic and Muslim intellectuals and members of the academia have called on the government of Egypt to found a department of Coptic Studies, where Coptic history, arts and language are studied, yet their calls were squarely ignored. Lately, University of Al-Fayoum in Middle Egypt, expressed its interest in having the subject included in the curriculum of the faculty of Egyptology, especially since the province of Fayoum has remains of important ancient Coptic settlements, and that foreign archeological missions are excavating in this area and other areas in Upper Egypt. Still, the idea has been resisted by some of the university staff with extremist leanings.

Last month, on the other hand, President Mubarak reopened the Coptic museum after its renovation. I believe, it is about time to establish a department of Coptic Studies in one of Egypt's universities, and to integrate the history of the Copts in the curricula of public and private schools as an important part of Egypt's history, as it extends from the third century BC to the tenth century AD.

Mr. Chairman,

Considering all the facts herein presented, I would like to call on the government of Egypt to cooperate in implementing all the UN human rights instruments in general and the rights of Egypt minorities in particular. Doing that is indispensable for the development and peace of our country.

Egypt's non-compliance to UN Human Rights law

Now, since time does not allow me to elaborate on the trickery of Egypt's authorities in dealing with such issues, I am only going to present one example on how the State of Egypt did not fully cooperate with the UN. In the *Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: Egypt, 05/08/94. A/49/18, paras.362-387*, members of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination regretted that the report of Egypt had not been prepared in accordance with the Committee's consolidated guidelines on reporting and had not contained the answers to questions which had remained unanswered during the consideration of the State party's previous report. Further information was also needed on the factors and difficulties encountered in implementing the provisions of the Convention. Equally, it was noted that the report lacked essential information as to the ethnic composition of the population.

Furthermore, concern was expressed by the Committee "over the violent attacks in recent months and years which had been directed towards foreigners and members of the Coptic Church in Egypt, and the problems faced by the State party in addressing that situation. In this connection, members of the Committee wished to know of the measures being taken to protect such groups from attack or harassment."

Also, concern was expressed over "the paucity of information contained in the State party's report on judicial, administrative or other measures adopted that give effect to the Convention, and their effect upon the situation in Egypt. In this respect, the omission of details of the

demographic composition of the population and the economic and social situation of different groups within the population is regretted."

Conclusion

Researchers probed what seemed to be an enigmatic problem, where Copts have been faced by restrictions on the freedom of religion and the right to practice it, forced conversion to Islam, recurrence of attacks on their village communities and individuals, inequality before the law and political marginalization, discrimination in education and employment as well as suppression of their Coptic culture.

Some concluded that four factors combined were behind the problems facing the Copts:

1. The emergence of a national identity crisis after the 1967;
2. The use of Islam by the ruling elites as a legitimization tool;
3. The lack of democracy; and
4. Increased economic inequalities. (Nadia Farah, *Religious Strife in Egypt*, p. 21)

Others researchers complemented these factors with the following:

- 1) The failure of the ruling elite and the partisan movement to formulate a political philosophy other than the Islamist's;
- 2) Rejecting the nature of the modern state where religious freedom, equal opportunity and full citizenship are among the principal tenets of the state;
- 3) The reemergence of the Muslim Brotherhood and their control of professional unions and their penetrating all social institutions;
- 4) Legal setbacks, where an imbalance exists between the legal rules and their burdens on one side and the different social powers on the other; in addition to the large gap between the legal texts and the changing realities. (Nabil Abdelfattah, *Al-nass wa'l-russass: Al-Islam Al-Siyasi wa'l-Aqbat wa'l-Dawlah Al-Hadithah fi Misr*, pp. 56 & 69-138)

Proposed mechanisms for Solutions to Problems involving Minorities

One may sum up the problems facing the Copts in "the lack of sufficient protection of both the cultural and the political rights of this indigenous religious minority: a problem that, some observers believe, bears risks for the future of the Egyptian nation state. As has been pointed out by specialists, "A democratic state and a pluralist society is one way of realizing political stability and accommodating cultural diversity. (Mario Apostolov, *The Copts*, in "Religious Minorities, Nation States and Security," Ashgate 2001, p/59).

To that end Canadian Egyptian Organization for Human Rights urges the Egyptian government to:

1. launch a nationwide campaign promoting and celebrating Coptic culture and religious diversity, including the establishment of a Coptic Studies Program in Egyptian universities;
2. take all necessary cultural and legal measures to combat violence and harassment against the Copts, punish offenders and provide material and psychological relief to the victims.
3. submit to concerned UN bodies a periodical report on the situation of minorities and on the measures and decision taken by national and local authorities to solve the problems faced by the Copts and other minorities.
4. transform the University of Al-Azhar to a public educational institution open to all Egyptians, regardless of their religion, and where Islamic studies should be taught only to those who would like to study them.

5. allow the founding of a National Coptic Council, democratically elected, to:
- a) administer Coptic community affairs, such as culture, education, religion, information, social affairs, inter-faiths relations and government cooperation;
 - b) encourage members of the Coptic minority to get involved in public and political life as citizens, and to carry out joint development projects with members of the Muslim community;
 - c) work as an early warning-mechanism in conjunction with the National Council of Human Rights, local and national authorities.

The Role of the UN

To realize these indispensable principal measures, CEOHR calls upon the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to play a leading role in promoting human rights culture and the promotion of the Declaration.

CEOHR also calls upon the OHCHR to:

- 1) Pursue every possible opportunity to engage Egypt in a meaningful dialogue through State reporting mechanism and Working Groups,
- 2) resume engaging Egypt over the following issues:
 - a) the denial of minorities within its borders;
 - b) Egypt's general declaration conditioning its conformity with ratified human rights treaties as long as they do not contradict with Islamic Shari'a. a declaration. A considered by human rights experts as amounting to an illegal general reservation, and which prompted HRC to demand that "Egypt must either clarify the scope of that declaration or withdraw it";
- 3) Provide Egypt with technical advisors with the aim of assisting it with meeting the requirements of treaty reporting;
- 4) Expert on Minorities or Special; Rapporteur to visit Egypt for fact finding with regard to the situation of minorities in that State;

Finally, Mr. Chairman, honorable members of the WGM, I would like to end my statement with this quote: "In a world flooded with the blood of ethnic strife, it is easy to overlook the silent pressure on a minority, which is unable to parade its wounds. Tyranny may pass unnoticed, but it has to be stopped before it leads to burning churches, destroying shops, and mass-killings." (Apostolov, p. 59).

Thank you, Mr. Chairman