

BARONESS COX OF QUEENSBURY STATEMENT TO COPTIC
DEMONSTRATION, LONDON, 23/1/10

Dear Friends,

First, may I say that I count it a great privilege to stand here with so many brothers and sisters from the Coptic Church.

Your church originated in the first century and you have held a frontline of faith in Egypt, for the rest of Christianity, over the centuries since then.

But you have suffered greatly in holding to your faith – our faith. Since the Muslim conquest of Egypt you have been subjected to the humiliation of the dhimmi-status of second-class citizenship, the fate of so many Christian communities living in lands under Islamic rule.

But you have kept the faith and, in spite of oppression and discrimination, you are the largest surviving Christian community in the Middle East and the largest religious minority in Egypt.

Therefore we who have the privilege of living in freedom, and who have a concern for the respect of fundamental human rights and freedoms, owe a debt of gratitude to you for upholding this fundamental freedom, at great cost.

And those of us who are Christians wish to thank you for your courage, your faithfulness and your witness over the centuries and for remaining strong and faithful today, despite continuing harassment, discrimination and persecution.

The continuation of the discrimination, oppression and persecution which afflict your people today is the reason for our gathering and is reflected in the text of the letter which will shortly be handed in to the Prime Minister.

The Christian Coptic community 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 your 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.

I quote a few extracts which highlight the nature of the concerns and the requests to the Government to take appropriate and overdue action:

‘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.

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.

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. We cannot emphasize 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.

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 civilization. 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.

We kindly ask the British government to pay more attention to what is happening in Egypt, to press the Egyptian government to observe the universally accepted standards of human rights.....

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) Criminalize 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.'

My friends, these requests to the Egyptian government are fundamentally reasonable and only require that government to fulfill its internationally recognized obligations which it has freely accepted as a signatory of the UDHR.

As I conclude, may I add that every injustice which is not recognized, every violation of human rights which is condoned, every form of oppression which is covered up, is an encouragement to other oppressors to victimize other vulnerable people and an encouragement to other governments to turn a blind eye to their citizens who are suffering injustice and persecution – knowing that they will be able to do the same with impunity.

My humanitarian and human rights work takes me to many countries where ruthless regimes or compromised governments inflict or condone violence and other violations of human rights on their own people – such as the brutal military junta in Burma, the tyrannical regime in North Korea, or, closer to home, the suffering inflicted on neighboring Sudan by the Islamist regime in Khartoum, which was responsible for 2 million dead & 4 million displaced in its military jihad against the peoples of southern Sudan and the marginalized areas – before the Peace Agreement of 2005 and then the relocation of killings and savagery in Darfur.

And just this week, many Christians were attacked and killed by militant Muslims in Jos, northern Nigeria. Although some Muslims were also killed in the escalation of violence, all the first-hand reports indicate that the violence was initiated by Islamic extremists – and that this is a tragic repetition of many similar religiously motivated attacks on Christian communities over recent decades.

My friends, the time has come to stand up and to stand together for freedom and to stand on behalf of the victims of those regimes and governments which deny freedom to their peoples and inflict or condone violence perpetrated on their own citizens.

I am therefore privileged to stand here today with you in support of your pleas for religious freedom for your people and an end to the violence, discrimination and harassment which they have suffered for far too long.

I hope and pray that the British and Egyptian governments will respond honorably, that the media will broadcast your case fairly – and that your people will be able to live in peace, freedom and justice in the land of your birthright, to which you have made such a historically rich cultural and spiritual contribution over the centuries.

Caroline Cox