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“Minority at Risk: Coptic Christians in Egypt”

*Helsinki Commission
Excerpts of Remarks by Chairman Chris Smith
July 22, 2011*

Good morning, and welcome to our witnesses and to everyone joining us today.

This morning we are going to focus on the question of what is happening to the Coptic Christians in Egypt, and what will happen to them, in the new country that is emerging from the revolution this spring? Early signs are discouraging: there has been escalation in violence against Copts, which has included the killing of dozens of Copts, firebombings, and the destruction of at least three churches.

Of course, Coptic Christians have long been marginalized, disadvantaged, and faced harsh discrimination, persecution and even violent attacks – both by the Egyptian government and by Muslim society in Egypt, where they constitute roughly 8% of a population of about 82 million people.

The plight of the Copts has been well documented, including by the State Department’s International Religious Freedom Reports and its Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, and by the reports of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. The most recent International Religious Freedom Report said that the Egyptian government’s respect for this human right is ‘poor.’

Given developments in Egypt, we have to be deeply concerned about what the next report will say.

The other focus of this hearing will be the widespread and credible allegations that in Egypt Coptic women and girls are subject to abduction, forced conversion to Islam, and forced marriage to Muslims. They appear to be targeted with deceptive and abusive practices, which often include violence and separate them forever, against their will, from their families.

The Egyptian government has completely failed to initiate credible investigations into these cases, which creates a climate of impunity for the perpetrators.

I'd like to say at the outset that this is only an initial hearing on the persecution of the Copts – or rather the second, since in January my good friend Mr. Wolf held a hearing on the persecution of Copts and other Christians in the Middle East. But of course the revolution against Mubarak has created a new situation, which calls for a new hearing, and I'd like to bring a special focus to the issue of the abduction of Coptic women and girls. If we need to, we will have a follow-up hearing later this year, until the Egyptian government gets the message, and the allegations of abduction are fully substantiated.

This has to remain an issue that is about action. In April 2010 I wrote to the State Department, together with 15 other Members of Congress, urging further investigation and reporting on exploitation of Coptic women. This spring Frank Wolf introduced legislation that would create a “Special Envoy to Promote Religious Freedom of Religious Minorities in the Middle East and South Central Asia.” That bill should soon be ready for a floor vote, and I will work with Mr. Wolf until it is passed.

Egypt is a major recipient of US foreign aid and it is a “Mediterranean Partner for Cooperation” of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. I hope its government is paying close attention today, and that it chooses the path of reform and religious freedom. If it doesn't, we should restructure our aid so as to promote religious freedom much more vigorously, and carefully consider designating Egypt as a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. This commission will certainly use OSCE forums to raise the issue of the Egyptian government's human rights abuses.