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From Arab Spring to Coptic Winter:

Sectarian Violence and the Struggle for Democratic Transition in Egypt

*Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Rep. Christopher H. Smith, Chairman
November 15, 2011*

Good afternoon and welcome to this, our second Helsinki Commission hearing on the volatile and dangerous situation facing the Coptic Christians in Egypt following the Arab Spring.

The world watched with great hope and anticipation as events unfolded in Tahrir Square earlier this year. This spring we saw Christians standing guard over Muslims during Friday prayers in the middle of the square. We saw Muslims standing guard over Christians as they celebrated mass in Tahrir.

Sadly, much has changed since then. While many of those who came together to forge the revolution want to continue that solidarity as they support Egypt's political transition, there are those who do not. The transition period has seen increasing violence against Coptic Christians. The current Egyptian government, controlled by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), has not adequately responded to this violence, and has not protected vulnerable Coptic Christians, and, as we have seen on video to our horror, has even committed acts of violence against Coptic protestors.

On Sunday, October 9, 2011, twenty-seven people were killed and more than 300 injured in Maspero when the Egyptian military attacked a peaceful group of Coptic Christians protesting the burning of a church in Aswan and demanding the removal of the governor of Aswan, who had justified the mob's destruction of the church by saying that it had been built without a permit.

In what has been deemed the "Massacre at Maspero," witnesses saw the army fired on the demonstrators with live ammunition and plow into the crowd with armored vehicles. Soldiers raided and stopped the live broadcast of two independent news channels that had been covering the clashes. At the same time, State-run television and radio reported that the Coptic

demonstrators had attacked the military and called for “honorable citizens” to “defend the army against attack”—inciting violence against the Coptic minority.

Amid widespread domestic and international outrage over the events, the White House issued a statement on October 10 saying that: “The president is deeply concerned about the violence in Egypt that has led to a tragic loss of life . . . Now is the time for restraint on all sides so that Egyptians can move forward together to forge a strong and united Egypt.”

With all due respect, the President seems to have completely missed the point. This is not a situation of equal power and equal responsibility for violence. This was not a lawless gang clash on the street, or a mob marauding the streets in the absence of a government. The Coptic community was protesting the fact that the Egyptian government in Aswan failed to protect Coptic property and allowed a mob to burn down the Coptic place of worship.

When Copts called on the military government to treat the Copts as equal citizens and protect their rights, the government itself turned on them with a massacre.

The time has come to ask: Is this government going to be better than the Mubarak thug regime?

This same government is investigating itself for the incident. And its assault on human rights continues.

In fact, the military has arrested at least 28 people—mostly Copts—in connection with the clashes, including prominent blogger Alaa Abdel Fattah. These individuals are being hauled before military prosecutors.

To date, despite multiple videos and eyewitness accounts showing the military’s use of lethal violence against unarmed protestors, the Egyptian military has yet to take responsibility for its actions, or otherwise demonstrate that it will protect all Egyptians, including the Coptic minority that make up more than 10% of its population.

According to press reports last week, a member of a government-backed fact-finding committee said that the Egyptian army did not use live ammunition to disperse protestors during the October 9 incident.

However, Hafez Abu Saeda, a senior figure in the government-sponsored National Council for Human Rights which set up the committee, also said that an independent investigation was needed to establish the full facts and that some state institutions, including the army, did not cooperate fully with the committee. Rights activists, including the Arab Network for Human Rights Information and Human Rights Watch, have criticized the report for a lack of detail.

Tragically, the Massacre at Maspero is not an isolated incident, but rather a continuation of the endemic discrimination against, and marginalization of, Coptic Christians in Egypt. According to the 2010 State Department International Religious Freedom Report for Egypt:

The status of respect for religious freedom by the government remained poor, unchanged from the previous year. Christians and members of the Baha'i Faith, which the government does not recognize, face personal and collective discrimination, especially in government employment and their ability to build, renovate, and repair places of worship. The government failed to prosecute perpetrators of violence against Coptic Christians and again failed to redress laws—particularly laws relating to church construction and renovation—and governmental practices, especially government hiring that discriminates against Christians, effectively allowing their discriminatory effects and their modeling effect on society to become further entrenched.

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom has noted that, “In response to sectarian violence, Egyptian authorities typically conduct ‘reconciliation’ sessions between Muslims and Christians as a means of resolving disputes. In some cases, authorities compel victims to abandon their claims to legal remedy. The failure to prosecute perpetrators fosters a climate of impunity.”

A report by the Egyptian Initiative for Human Rights (EIPR) covering the period from January 2008 to January 2010 documented 53 incidents of sectarian violence—about two incidents per month—that took place in 17 of Egypt's 29 governorates. Most of the attacks were by Muslims on Christians and Christian churches or property.

Egypt will not reach its democratic goals through the oppression of its minority peoples; democracy does not come with an iron fist. Rather, democracy springs from the belief that all people are created equal and have the right to participate in their own governance. A legitimate government is of the people, by the people, and for the people—including minorities. A legitimate government respects human rights and submits to the rule of law.

The Egyptians demonstrated this belief in Tahrir Square, but seem to be losing their way—spinning backward into tyrannical abuses of power.

If there is any hope for a democratic and peaceful Egypt, the Copts must be allowed to contribute actively to Egyptian society and to the transformation of their country without fearing for their lives.