

Sentencing is significant for Egypt's Christians

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Jerusalem, January 21 (ENInews)—The sentencing to death of a Muslim man in connection with an attack in 2010 that killed six Coptic Christians and a Muslim police officer is seen as being particularly significant for Egypt's Christians and a marked difference from previous responses to attacks on Copts.

"A decision on this case is long-overdue, and while Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) values the court's pursuit of justice for the victims, CSW does not condone the death penalty for any crime," said Mervyn Thomas, chief executive of CSW, in a statement.

CSW, the leading human rights advocacy organisation specialising in religious freedom in the United Kingdom, in association with United Action for Egyptian Christians, also said it will host a day of prayer for Christians in Egypt on 29 January in London.

Mohamed Ahmed Hussein, 39, was sentenced to death on 16 January by an Egyptian State Security Court in connection with the shooting deaths after a New Year's Mass in Nag Hammadi in January, 2010. The court said the sentence would be sent to the Grand Mufti for confirmation. The Grand Mufti is Egypt's top religious authority and according to law is called on to confirm death sentences. Hussein's two alleged accomplices in the attack were charged with aiding in the murders and with possession of weapons, and their sentences are scheduled to be announced on 20 February, according to media reports.

Last year saw an escalation in violence against Christians following the shooting in Nag Hammadi. In March, an attack on a large church in Marsa Matrouh left 24 injured. In November, a contested church site in the Talibiya district of Giza incited violent protests in which two Christians were shot by state security police. In an attack in 2000 in which 21 Copts were killed, no one was convicted.

According to an Agence France Presse report, Anba Kirolos, the Coptic Bishop of Nag Hammadi, and his congregation said they were "satisfied" with the Egyptian Court's ruling which came just two weeks after another attack against Copts during a New Year's Mass in Alexandria left 23 people dead and 80 wounded. A week earlier, a Muslim policeman shot and killed an elderly Copt man in a train in southern Egypt. According to reports, the policeman is to be tried for premeditated murder.

While many Egyptians pride themselves in what they say are close relations between Muslims and Christians, sectarian violence is not new in Egypt and recently Egyptian Christians have become more vocal in their protests against anti-Christian discrimination and harassment which goes unpunished or receives light sentencing.

"Acts of sectarian violence are on a terrifying rise across Egypt. If they truly seek to rescue Egypt from sectarian violence and restore the humanity of their society, their treatment of Copts as second-class citizens must stop," wrote Amr Hamzawy, research director and senior associate at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, in a Los Angeles Times blog on 12 January.

Muslims have begun to speak out against extremist violence. Following the Alexandria bombing, there was a call by intellectuals and activists for Muslims to come out as "human shields" to churches in case they were targeted for attacks on the 7 January Coptic Christmas. Muslims were also among those who protested on the streets against the Alexandria attack.

In an interview with the Ahram Online news website, Egyptian Muslim journalist Ekram Youssef, who last year created the crescent and cross logo with the slogan "A Nation for All," said that it was "time to change and unite." Her logo was adopted following the Alexandria attack by many of Egypt's four million Facebook users as their profile picture, according to Ahram Online.

Though she held the government responsible for dealing with the attacks, it was also "time for Egyptian citizens to act to revive the true meaning of national unity," she said.