

Persecution

Contributed by Administrator
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Egypt: Abducted From The Streets And Never Seen Again

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In Egypt's shocking new crimewave, all these women and hundreds more have been kidnapped amidst fears they're being used as sex slaves. Look investigates…

Amal Sa'ad Bishy, 24, pulls a photo of her younger sister Nevin, 20, from her handbag. "My sister disappeared on her way to college last year," she says. "We're sure she's been kidnapped. We'll never stop looking for her, but we have no idea where she is – perhaps we never will."

Amal is one of Egypt's eight million Copts – the descendents of the original Egyptians. They are Christians who live uneasily side-by-side with the Muslim majority in the Middle Eastern country. Coptic leaders say Islamic fundamentalists in the south of Egypt are determined to drive them out of their villages and take their land.

But in the past few years, a new target for the fundamentalists has emerged – across Cairo and the Nile Valley, police and the media have reported that hundreds of young Coptic women like Nevin have left home under mysterious circumstances or simply vanished. Look learned of 40 cases in the last year alone. Surrounding most disappearances are allegations that the women have been kidnapped by a small number of fundamentalist Muslim gangs or men working on their own, and forced to undergo conversion to Islam through intimidation, violence and rape.

"Nevin was very religious, and had actually talked to me about becoming a nun just a few days before she disappeared," explains Amal. "A week after she vanished, the state security contacted my family and explained Nevin had walked into a police station saying she wanted to convert to Islam. The police said they were going to investigate if her wish to convert was genuine, but they questioned her inside the police station and our family was barred from seeing her.

"Eventually, our priest managed to get into the police station and told us Nevin was with two men and was hysterical. She acted as if she'd been drugged. The police later decided the conversion was legal and let the men escort Nevin away. Since then, we've heard nothing. I'll not rest until I know my sister is alright."

Last month, hundreds of Copts went on hunger strike inside a Cairo monastery to protest against the most recent alleged kidnappings and forced conversions of three young women. Marwa Adly, 21, Rita Misien, 19, and Mariane Magdi, 18, all "disappeared" in separate incidents amidst claims they'd been abducted off the street by fundamentalist gangs.

Mervat Wasef, Mariane's mum, believes her daughter has been abducted, raped and converted to Islam. She claims the largely Islamic police force in Egypt's capital has refused to investigate her daughter's disappearance. "We live in Ezbit, a poor area of Cairo, where Muslims and Christians suffer alongside each other," she says.

"My daughter is very pretty and started attracting local men. She told us she was frightened and intimidated by their attention, as she'd heard about other women being kidnapped. She was in the final year at technical college and was so terrified she wanted someone to accompany her there, as she feared something would happen to her. At first, her dad or I would walk with her, but then her elder sister began to go. One day, her sister was late, and Mariane went to college on her own. She never came back."

Following her daughter's disappearance, a tip-off led Mervat to a building where she suspected Mariane was being held – but she was refused access. Both the police and the Egyptian state security later told the family Mariane wanted to become a Muslim and had asked for protection from her family.

"The police laughed at us – they wanted a bribe to even give us a clue where Mariane was," says Mervat. "I kept asking the officers: 'What have I done to you to treat me like this? Where is my daughter?' Mariane was so kind-hearted – she did everything in the house without being asked. Now I feel guilty we didn't do enough to protect her I miss everything about her – I just want to talk to her, hug her. Another local girl came back after being kidnapped – she escaped through a bathroom window and managed to reach her family. She spoke of being physically and sexually abused, and treated like a dog. If this is the fate my

daughter is facing, I can't bear it."

According to Father Yacoub Seliman, priest of the fourth century Al-Mu'allaqah church, attractive Coptic women like Mariane are in constant danger. "They say we have religious freedom here in Egypt, but that's just a myth," he says. "It's not safe — more and more Christian girls are being kidnapped off the streets of Cairo and major cities. When we speak to the authorities about this, we're made to fear them — and sometimes they just don't respond. What else can we do? Women like Mariane don't wear Burkhas and dress in Western fashions, so they're easily singled out by a few sexually repressed men who find them attractive and want a Coptic girl to be their wife. As these women's families wouldn't traditionally allow them to marry a Muslim man, they're being taken by force."

The Copts, hundreds of thousands of whom have already emigrated to the United States, Canada and Europe, blame the government for encouraging the religious divide in Egypt. The authorities have tried to stop fundamentalists by encouraging television evangelists to preach mainstream Islam, but some of the same preachers have branded Christians as infidels during these popular Friday sermons, which are viewed by millions.

The other problem for the Copts is that they're among the poorest people in the country. "We feel we're not taken seriously by the authorities," says Father Seliman. Many in the Mokattam or "Garbage City" area, in the east of Cairo, survive by street-sweeping certain city districts without pay, on the condition they don't touch private rubbish bins. Some people help them by scattering "valuable" bits of rubbish on the pavements and the roads.

Here in Mokattam, every morning, Maema Khardes walks through the busy streets of Cairo to her local church. She pulls out a photo of her daughter, Marwa Adly, who was kidnapped last year, holds it to her heart, and says a prayer. Her first tears of the day drop onto the stone floor below her. "Marwa is gone, lost to me at 19," she cries. "I could walk past the house where she might be being held at any moment and not realise. No one seems to be able to help, as no one but her kidnapers know where she is."

WITHOUT A TRACE

Egypt isn't the only place where large numbers of women are going missing:

India

Each year, over 500 young women are taken by criminals and held to ransom for as little as £250, in what's being called a kidnap epidemic. If their families can't or won't pay up, they're either killed or sold into the sex industry.

Iraq

More than 400 Iraqi women have been kidnapped and raped in the country since the capture of Saddam Hussein. Now, after the collapse of law and order, many women are afraid to go out alone.

Vietnam

Hundreds of women have been kidnapped, often by Vietnamese women, and later sold as brides in China. It's thought this is because as China gets richer, women move to the big cities — leaving more desperate men in the countryside.

"I Was Snatched From A Bus"

Marina Mahar Iskander, 27, is one of the few women to have escaped her kidnapers after being grabbed by four men on her way to uni

"I boarded a bus to my university in Cairo in February this year. There were four men on the bus. One of them, who was about 20, came over and smiled, saying they were celebrating his birthday.

He offered me some honey pastries. After I ate one, I began to lose the feeling in my legs. I just about recall the men leading me off the bus. The street was busy and I felt like I was sinking.

The last thing I remember was being bundled into a taxi. It seemed like hours later when I woke up in a cellar. The men told me I'd been kidnapped for being Christian. They ripped the cross off my neck. Two of them began beating me. One fondled me and whispered threats he'd rape me. I was so terrified, I wet myself. I later found out one of them had been texting my dad using my mobile, threatening him they'd take all my sisters. One of the texts said: "Marina's not accepting easily, but she'll embrace Islam for sure."

I didn't know, but my parents protested on the streets about me. The police had done nothing. News spread and Copts gathered outside a police station one night. There was a riot, and my picture was shown on the news. The men panicked and forced me to sign a paper saying I'd converted to Islam. Then I was bundled into a car and taken out of Cairo. I thought they'd kill me.

I was left in a village and they drove off. I'd been held for a week. I phoned my dad, who came and got me. The police decided I'd gone voluntarily. They even produced the document I'd signed, so the men who drugged and beat me were never punished. Despite what happened, I feel lucky to be alive & many of the girls who disappear are never seen again.

Look Weekly, Launched in February 2007, is the fast-paced, glamorous, glossy high street fashion and celebrity weekly for young women. An innocent man has been in prison since 1998

CASE SUMMARY: Coptic Christian, Shaiboub William Aarsal, has been framed for a double murder he did not commit. **BACKGROUND:** When Coptic Christian Shaiboub William heard that the bodies of two Christians had been found murdered in his village of El-Kosheh, Upper Egypt, on the morning of August 14 1998, he and his 11-yr old son, Emad, rushed to the scene where a large crowd had already gathered. They were taken for interrogation by the police with over 1000 other Christians from the village and surrounding areas. Many of the detainees were tortured in order to extract a confession, despite the fact that the names of Muslim murder suspects had been given to the police. Those tortured included William, girls as young as 13 and even Emad, who was suspended from a spinning ceiling fan, threatened with a large gun in a remote place, and subjected to painful electric shocks.

William was eventually charged with the double murder based solely on the confessions of two army officers, who later attempted to retract their statements, saying they had been given under duress. He was incarcerated for two years before his sentence was finally handed down in June 2000, 15 years with hard labour.

Shaiboub William has appealed the court's decision but a date for the appeal has not yet been given.

None of the police officers involved in the round up have been punished and one of them has even been promoted.

Courtesy of Canadian Coptic Association

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