

COPTIC MARTYRS BLOOD CRIES OUT

Contributed by UK Coptic Association
Wednesday, 24 October 2007

Press Release

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February 6, 2001
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The United Kingdom Coptic Association was extremely shocked by the verdict handed by an Egyptian court on Feb, 5, 2001. The court failed to announce a single murder conviction in the January 2000 massacre of 21 Coptic Christians in the village of Al-Kosheh.

The Sohag criminal court in Southern Egypt convicted 4 of 96 defendants charged with crimes connected to the massacre, and only on lesser charges. The other 92 were acquitted of all charges.

All four men convicted in yesterday's court verdict are Muslims, though not one was convicted for murder. The harshest penalty imposed was against Mayez Amin Abdel-Rahim, sentenced to 12 years in prison for "accidental homicide and illegal possession of a weapon"; Mohammed fawzi Shabib received two years in prison, also for "accidental homicide"; and two men, Abu Ella Ahmed and El Fangery Abu Shakir, were each sentenced to one year in prison for premeditated burning of a truck-trailer. Since time served is generally credited towards the final sentence, the latter two have theoretically already served all but one month of their sentences.

There has been strong evidence from the outset of this case that the government of Egypt pursued a political strategy to cover up the gravity of the religious tensions in Al-Kosheh and to avoid the politically sensitive issue of punishing Muslims for the murder of Christians. This policy, evidenced by the complicity of local security officials, the spreading of misleading information by government officials who shifted the blame to unnamed "foreigners", the cracking down on human rights reporting, and efforts by the courts to use mass trials to create image of harmony rather than convict the guilty, culminated in yesterday's denial of justice.

True justice should never be sacrificed under any circumstances, specially for the sake of a superficial national unity. Dismissing sentencing to the convicted murderers will politicize

the sacred judicial system. This unfair sentence in such a high profile case has not only hurt Egypt's national security, but also tarnished her image to the rest of the world.

It is sad to conclude that the Copts have been an expendable commodity in the Egyptian government's attempt to appease the Muslim extremists. After yesterday's verdict, Egypt's Christians may well have cause to fear for their lives.

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