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From The European Association
of Jehovah's Christian Witnesses

Contribution to the Report of the U.N. High
Commissioner for Human Rights on the
implementation of the new review mechanism of the
Human Rights Council, established by GA Resolution
60/251 and by the Human Rights Council in Resolution
5/1 of 18 June 2007 for the 7th session 2010 of the UPR
(Dates of the WG: February 2010).

EGYPT

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JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES—EGYPT

Background	2
Accusations and Abuses	2
Efforts Toward Gaining Greater Religious Freedom	2
Restrictions on Religious Freedom.....	3
Abuses of Religious Freedom.....	3
Societal Abuses and Discrimination	5
Religious Freedom Objectives	5

Background

The first mention of the Christian denomination of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Egypt dates back to 1912 when a group visited Cairo and the nearby area. In the 1930’s, congregations were established in Alexandria and in Cairo. During the post-war years of 1945-50, the number of Jehovah’s Witnesses grew to more than 60.

Well into the 1950’s, Egyptian Witnesses enjoyed relative freedom of worship. On November 3, 1951, the Cairo Governorate granted recognition to the branch of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, while in 1956 the Governorate of Alexandria granted similar recognition to the local congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Accusations and Abuses

Beginning in the mid-1950’s, a defamatory campaign was launched against Jehovah’s Witnesses, accusing them of being Zionists. The sources show that these accusations came from some ecclesiastical authorities who claimed that as many as 5,000 Zionists under the cover of the name Jehovah’s Witnesses represented a threat to State security. Those accusations were false. Egyptian Witnesses were then a very small group and absolutely not Zionists.

In 1959, the Witnesses were ordered to cease holding their religious services. On June 20, 1960, a decree of the Ministry of Social Affairs deregistered the branch of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society and effectively banned the activities of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Egypt. The reason given was that Jehovah’s Witnesses were registered under a law covering philanthropic and social societies but not religious denominations. At the time, there were about 400 Witnesses in Egypt. Several Witness ministers were arrested, and others were threatened with fines and imprisonment. Eventually, the ban on Jehovah’s Witnesses in Egypt led to severe religious persecution, including fierce beatings, extreme torture, and cruel treatment in concentration camps for many more Witnesses. The troubles continued into the 1970’s, and then slowly abated.

Adding to their difficulties, Jehovah’s Witnesses had been inaccurately portrayed as Zionists and as a security threat. Consequently, on May 12, 1964, the Boycott Office of the League of Arab Nations handed down a unanimous decree stating that Arab nations would “ban absolutely all dealings with said society [Jehovah’s Witnesses], along with all its branches and offices wherever these may be found, including the ensuing closure of its branches and offices in Arab States, and prohibiting the bringing in, and circulation/distribution of its publications and printed material.” Further, the Administration of Land Registration and Documentation of the Ministry of Justice in Egypt issued three directives (in 1985, 1993, and 1999) that prohibit its agencies from registering anything from the Watch Tower Society or Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Efforts Toward Gaining Greater Religious Freedom

The unfortunate misunderstanding leading to the ban in 1960 continues to keep honest, law-abiding citizens in Egypt who are Jehovah’s Witnesses from enjoying the fundamental freedoms guaranteed in its Constitution (e.g., Articles 40 and 46) and other laws. For example, Jehovah’s Witnesses may not obtain houses of worship, though they have such places of worship in Jordan and other Arab and Muslim lands. Although innocent of wrongdoing, they continue subject to constant harassment and

mistreatment by the SSIB. Witnesses in Egypt have seen some improvement in their ability to gather freely for worship and incidents of physical abuse have recently come to an end, and for both of these developments they are grateful.

Jehovah's Witnesses repeatedly attempted to obtain legal registration. On September 1, 1960, an application was submitted to the authorities but without success. In June 1991, the Witnesses again filed a request with the Ministry of Social Affairs to be legally recognized, but it was denied on July 18, 1991. The Witnesses filed a complaint against the denial but lost in court on May 8, 1994. In 1999 Jehovah's Witnesses applied again for legal recognition but faced technical difficulties: the Egyptian Real Estate Office refused to register a contract in the name of the association because a government decree prohibited the legalizing of any document for Jehovah's Witnesses. They filed a complaint against the denial but lost in court. A further attempt to obtain legal registration was made in March 2000. Again, the request was denied on January 29, 2001.

Harsh treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses began anew in 2001, leading to torture, beatings, and mistreatment as recently as April 2007. Out of concern for the escalating ill treatment, the Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses commissioned an international delegation to convey to the Egyptian authorities the concern and dismay of Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide regarding the mistreatment of their fellow worshippers in Egypt.

Since 2006, that international delegation of Jehovah's Witnesses from Belgium, Italy, and the United States has met numerous times with various members of Egypt's government offices. The delegation has also had opportunity to explain the Witnesses' position to Egypt's National Council of Human Rights. (*NCHR 2005-2006 Annual Report*, pages 157-9) Egyptian authorities expressed their opinion that Jehovah's Witnesses in Egypt have the right to meet together for worship and prayer without interference. Jehovah's Witnesses hope that this normalization process will continue and will lead to their enjoying the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution of Egypt.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In meetings with representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Social Affairs, and National Council of Human Rights in 2006, the Egyptian authorities were pleased to allow Jehovah's Witnesses to meet and worship in private homes in groups of 30 or less. The permission to meet in groups larger than five, as was previously the case, has been very welcome. It would be good, however, if the Witnesses could meet as a congregation, normally comprised of about 60-100 adherents, as they do in other lands.

In an April 2008 meeting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the delegation was told that there should be no problem in openly importing Bibles and Bible-based literature into the country. A request was made in August 2008 to send to Jehovah's Witnesses in Egypt, free of any charge, 100 copies of the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, the Bible translation used by Jehovah's Witnesses. To date, this simple request to fill a need of co-religionists in Egypt has not been acknowledged.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The SSIB maintains very strict surveillance of the homes of Jehovah's Witnesses, their meeting places, and their telephone calls. Also, the Witnesses' mail is under surveillance and, when religious publications are sent to family members from relatives that live abroad, these publications are often confiscated and the intended recipient is called in for interrogation. The SSIB sends their agents to buildings where Jehovah's Witnesses live to talk to their neighbors, often portraying the Witnesses as Zionists and security threats.

The SSIB have continued their interrogations throughout the past year, including this month. They attempt to enlist Witnesses as spies and threaten that they will cause Witnesses to be fired from their

employment. Additionally, the SSIB has been exerting pressure on Witnesses that come from foreign countries by visiting them where they stay, interrogating them, and sending agents to follow them and interrogate them in tourist and public places:

- In November 2008, the SSIB called **Shahir Habib** to the SSIB headquarters. Mr. Habib is newly baptized and was soon to marry. He was told that the SSIB needed to speak with him to congratulate him for his coming marriage. When he went, Mr. Morgan asked him many questions. When Mr. Habib said that he came to answer only for himself, Mr. Morgan became very furious and hit the table saying that he is working for the security of Egypt and has the right to ask and receive answers. The implication was clear that if Shahir Habib did not ‘cooperate’ with SSIB, he and his family would face continued severe pressure from SSIB.
- Around the middle of April 2009, following the Memorial of Jesus’ death on April 9, 2009, **Samir Mehanni Luca** was called to meet Mr. Morgan at the headquarters of the SSIB at 9 p.m. He waited until 10 p.m. when someone came and covered his eyes at the first floor, and then he was directed to the 4th floor to meet Mr. Morgan. His eyes were kept bound until the end of the investigation at 11 p.m. He was standing during the investigation. He was asked about the names of his family members and the family of his son’s fiancée one-by-one and about many names of other Witnesses. He was also asked if he was invited to a large international gathering to be held in Rome this summer, if the tickets are paid by the organization, from whom he receives the literature, and if he goes in the preaching work. At the end, he was asked not to hold the meetings in his house so as not to bother the neighbors. Then the investigation ended and Mr. Morgan apologized for the annoyance. Two days later an agent from the SSIB came to Samir’s house and asked about the address of two Witnesses, one of whom is the mother of his son’s fiancée and the other is her sister.
- At the end of April 2009, **Nabila Lotfy** was called by Mr. Morgan to meet him in the SSIB headquarters at 9 p.m. She was asked about her family and all her relatives. He asked for names, addresses, telephone numbers, and occupations. He had a list in his hand and he showed her that he was checking the names she was mentioning. She told about all her brothers except for her brother who is a Witness elder in Canada, though he is well known to the SSIB. He asked her about her son and daughter. Then he asked about her job. She works in the department of Passport and Nationality under the Ministry of Interior, a critical and sensitive place in the eyes of the SSIB. He asked how many years she has worked there, does she preach at work, do other colleagues know that she is a Witness, and does she help Witnesses to get passports. Then he asked about many names of appointed overseers in her congregation and other congregations. He asked for full names and mobile numbers of three Witnesses.
- On May 6, 2009, **Maher Zarif Helmy** was contacted on his mobile from someone in SSIB headquarters to come at 9 p.m. that same day to meet Mr. Morgan. He went on time but waited until 10 p.m. when someone blindfolded him and guided him to Mr. Morgan. He was asked personal details about his family members. Mr. Maher had worked as a manager in KLM Airlines and had just resigned. He was asked about who studied the Bible with him, who baptized him, where he got baptized, and why he resigned from his employment. Then he was asked about a failed engagement more than 10 years ago and why it failed. Mr. Morgan suggested names of some Witnesses with whom Mr. Maher attends the meetings. Then he asked him about the salary he used to get in KLM and again why he resigned. He was asked if he was in the army or not, about donations made to support the Witnesses’ activities, who conducts the meetings, and where he attends meetings. Since Mr. Maher is now self-employed in ticketing travel, he was asked many questions about Witnesses for whom he booked tickets to attend a large international convention to be held in Rome this summer. Mr. Morgan told him that he already knew all this information but he prefers to hear it from Mr. Maher, asking him to cooperate, otherwise, as he said, “I can wear my pajamas and stay with you till the morning, so better make it easy for me and you.” He was asked about why so many Witnesses are traveling to Rome this year, and he asked about the accommodations in Rome there since many Witnesses do not have the economic

means for accommodations. Mr. Maher has the impression that his ticket-reservation computer is hacked by the SSIB since Mr. Morgan was well aware of details related to the ticketing of some Witnesses.

The SSIB maintains a constant unnecessary pressure on the local Witnesses and also on foreign Witnesses entering the country. There is a deep suspicion on the part of the SSIB and officials in general about any foreign Witness who visits Egypt. The officials insist on knowing all details even if a Witness comes only for tourism. They have recently insisted that photocopies of passports be delivered by hand to them by representatives of the local Witnesses, even if the visitor is of Egyptian nationality but lives abroad. In one of these cases, the SSIB threatened that if this reporting is not done promptly, the SSIB “will go back to the previous harassing treatment.” It seems that such harassment is already taking place.

Societal Abuses and Discrimination

In the reporting period spanning 2008 and 2009, the international delegation met with representatives of Egypt’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, its National Council of Human Rights, and other officials during four visits to Egypt. In most contacts with government officials from 2006 to the present, the delegation has requested assistance in setting up a meeting with appropriate officials in the Ministry of Interior. The delegation and those who coordinate the worship of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Egypt would use opportunities to meet to constructively address any concerns regarding the Witnesses’ activities and worship. Regrettably, no meeting has been offered with the Ministry of Interior but rather State Security officers continue to harass and intimidate Egyptian Witnesses.

Religious Freedom Objectives

Segments of the Egyptian government, particularly members of the National Council of Human Rights, have taken commendable steps to help Jehovah’s Witnesses. Regrettably, the Ministry of Interior has not been directed to alter its posture regarding the activities of Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Governing Body of Jehovah’s Witnesses has made it a priority to assist by repeatedly sending international delegations, and these have been able to obtain measurable improvements. Nonetheless, the overall result has thus far been disappointing. Even Egypt’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been unable or unwilling to assist in ending harassment and in allowing the Witnesses to receive a small shipment of Bibles for their personal use.

- Jehovah’s Witnesses in Egypt and as a worldwide organization call upon the government of Egypt to
- (1) end the disgraceful tactics of State Security—harassment, false accusations, threats, and pressure on Jehovah’s Witnesses;
 - (2) repeal the June 20, 1960, decree of the Ministry of Social Affairs deregistering the branch of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society;
 - (3) cancel the directives of the Administration of Land Registration and Documentation of the Ministry of Justice in Egypt that prohibit its agencies from registering a title to property belonging to Jehovah’s Witnesses;
 - (4) allow Jehovah’s Witnesses to import Bibles and Bible literature used in their weekly program of scriptural education and worship;
 - (5) allow Jehovah’s Witnesses to have simple, dignified places of worship where they can meet for worship as they do elsewhere, in congregations of as many as 100 or somewhat more, without interference; and
 - (6) legally register Jehovah’s Witnesses as a Christian religion, with the rights to worship freely as guaranteed by Egypt’s Constitution.