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# **Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, December 6, 2011**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Scott Reid**



## Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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•(1305)

[Translation]

**Le président (M. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, PCC)):** Order, please.

We are the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today, December 6, 2011, we are holding our 13<sup>th</sup> hearing of the current sitting of Parliament.

[English]

Today we are continuing our study into the persecution of the Copt community in Egypt. I'll turn to that matter in a moment and to our witness, but first I want to alert you to the fact that at the end of this meeting I'd like to deal with a couple of unrelated items of business. Some were administrative, dealing with some budget issues. I don't want to be specific until we're in camera. One in particular deals with a potential witness. I want to discuss it with you in camera. I suggest we do it at the end so we don't have to clear out our witness and bring him back in. That would be my suggestion.

Mr. Sweet.

**Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC):** On the issue I spoke to you about, I'd like to have one or two minutes. I've spoken to a couple of members, and we may not get agreement at this meeting, but at least they can go back and check their schedules on it.

**The Chair:** All right, we'll try to leave enough time for that.

Let's go directly to our witness. He is Alex Neve, the secretary general of the English-speaking section of Canadian Amnesty International. Mr. Neve has come before us before, and therefore needs no introduction. He has provided us with some documents relating to Egypt, and they have been distributed.

Mr. Neve, I wonder if we could turn the floor over to you.

**Mr. Alex Neve (Secretary General, Amnesty International):** Thank you very much.

Good afternoon, members. It's always a pleasure to be in front of you. I'm certainly pleased to have an opportunity to address such a timely and important human rights concern as the situation in Egypt, with specific focus on the plight of Coptic Christians.

It's trite to begin by highlighting what an unprecedented and remarkable year this has been in Egypt. It's quite something to imagine that if this hearing were being held just one year ago today,

on December 6, 2010, we would not have begun to imagine the range and nature of changes that would play out over the year to come. In fact the magnitude of change throughout North Africa and the Middle East was at that point not even a dream. It was still ten days before Mohamed Bouazizi's desperate protest of self-immolation in Tunisia that unleashed the spectacular movement for change that has swept through the region.

This movement has brought groundbreaking change to several countries, but has also unleashed terrifying brutality and crackdowns in others. Syria comes quickly to mind, with up to 4,000 people killed in the past eight months, as does Bahrain. I want to bring to the attention of members of the subcommittee a Canadian citizen, Naser Al-Raas, who was subjected to torture after being imprisoned earlier this year. He is at risk of being taken back into custody tomorrow to serve a five-year prison term, simply because he peacefully protested in Bahrain.

On December 6, 2010, in Egypt the decades-old apparatus of a brutal, heavy-handed military and the iron-fisted rule of Hosni Mubarak seemed unassailable, and with them, well-established patterns of widespread and very serious human rights violations. Until that time the rest of the world, including Canada, had unfortunately done very little to counter those violations for various reasons, many of them tied up in the contentious and complicated geopolitics of the region. Egypt's abysmal human rights record was not challenged in any meaningful way by the international community for many long decades.

The concerns were numerous and the victims and survivors countless. Among the many concerns Amnesty International had documented and spoken out about for many years were serious human rights abuses against members of the Coptic Christian community in Egypt. In preparing for today's session I very quickly went back and pulled some sad reminders of those concerns from over the years. Our reporting noted that Coptic Christians were among the civilians targeted regularly by armed Islamist groups, including Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, beginning in 1992, when those groups took up arms against the Egyptian government.

On February 14, 1997—ironically, Valentine's Day—an Amnesty press release condemned an attack in St. George Church in a town in upper Egypt. Four armed and masked men burst into the church and opened fire on a group of 30 young Coptic Christians while they were listening to a sermon. Ten were killed and five others were badly injured.

Another Amnesty press release from January 12, 2010, condemns a drive-by shooting as worshippers were leaving a Coptic Christmas Eve service. Six worshippers were shot dead. The killings came at a time of considerable unrest and clashes among Muslims and Copts in the area. Our press release noted that Egyptian authorities failed to provide adequate protection and security for the Coptic community, which was clearly vulnerable. There was a notable absence of security forces, which are usually deployed during festivities to guard churches at that time of year.

Then at the beginning of this year, on the cusp of Egypt's remarkable protest movement that unleashed such tremendous changes, there was another deadly church attack on January 1, 2011. Worshippers at a Coptic church in Alexandria were targeted in a bombing that killed 23 and injured scores of others who were taking part in a New Year's midnight service.

• (1310)

So before things began to change in Egypt, the record was sadly and starkly clear. There was a well-established pattern of attacks by armed groups targeting the Coptic Christian community, very often specifically targeting churches and church services. Those attacks have been ongoing for close to 20 years. Far too often it was clear that Egyptian authorities were doing far too little to provide the community with safety and protection in the face of that deadly violence, which brings us to this year's tremendous changes.

Underneath all of the fanfare, political drama, and exhilaration of an inspiring popular movement, underneath the stunning fall of Hosni Mubarak from feared strong-man president to accused criminal now facing a very public trial, have there been meaningful and sustainable human rights changes? Do the changes point to a brighter human rights future for Egyptians? And what do the changes mean for the country's beleaguered Coptic Christian community, thought to number between six and eight million, some 10% of the population?

Last month we released a report entitled "Broken Promises: Egypt's Military Rulers Erode Human Rights". I think the title says it all. I've provided you with copies of that report today, and we have the following to say by way of an overview of these past several months.

The Supreme Council for Armed Forces, which assumed power when former president Mubarak was ousted on February 11, had stated that they would oversee "a peaceful transition of authority within a free and democratic system". However, ahead of the November elections to the People's Assembly, the SCAF arbitrarily restricted the very human rights, including freedom of expression, association, and assembly, that are instrumental to ensuring free debate of social and political issues. Criticism of authorities regarding the pace of reform has been ruthlessly suppressed. Military courts have imprisoned 12,000 civilians. Military prosecutors have summonsed, interrogated, and ordered the detention of those who dare to criticize the army, and military forces have used unnecessary or excessive force to disperse demonstrations. The euphoria of the uprising, therefore, has now been replaced by fears that one repressive rule has simply been replaced with another.

The jubilation of the moment and the very welcome decision of the armed forces at the time not to shoot at protesters during the

uprising have obscured the fact that the country is still, by default, under military rule a year later, although the SCAF had promised power would be handed to an elected civilian government.

In the name of ensuring security and stability, the authorities have committed numerous human rights violations, ignoring the very demands for social justice and fundamental freedoms that triggered the uprising. Indeed, Amnesty International's assessment is that ten months later, the SCAF has been moving further and further away from meeting the human rights demands voiced by millions of Egyptians during the 25 January revolution and the promises that arose from it. The country's state of emergency remains in force. The relatives of those unlawfully killed by the security forces during the revolution still await justice and compensation. Torture and unfair trials remain routine practices. Discrimination against women and religious minorities persists. Freedoms of expression, association, and assembly continue to be undermined. Refugees and asylum seekers continue to be killed at the borders with Israel or detained and forcibly deported to countries where they are at risk of serious human rights violations. Millions of people in slums continue to be denied essential services and are still waiting for their voices to be heard. It's not an optimistic picture.

• (1315)

I'm going to come in a moment to what this all means for the Coptic community, but first I want to draw particular attention to one of the many concerns I just noted, and that is ongoing discrimination against women, because this is key to the larger human rights agenda in the country.

Egyptian women were instrumental in the revolution, yet the hopes raised for women's rights in those heady days have not been fulfilled. Many would say they are close to being dashed now. Women are still being largely excluded from taking part in their country's future, and that urgently needs to be turned around.

There are many contributing factors to the difficulty women face in being able to play an equal role and participating in shaping the new Egypt: lack of political awareness due to high levels of illiteracy, harassment, and coercion when voting; attacks on women candidates; social attitudes serving as a barrier to women seeking public office; women being sidelined in political parties and trade unions; ineffective quota systems—weaker than in previous Egyptian elections; and the exclusion of women from important policy-making functions and bodies—for instance, not one woman was appointed to the very important constitutional amendments committee that was established in March of this year.

What does all this add up to for the country's Coptic community? As a starting point, we have to recognize and underscore that Egyptians of all faiths and all denominations took part in the January 25 revolution. All equally put their faith and hope in this movement for change. However, religious minorities have continued to suffer discrimination by the authorities and to receive inadequate state protection in the face of continuing and what appears to be mounting violence.

Discrimination and attacks against Coptic Christians are particularly prevalent and appear to have worsened since the SCAF assumed power. In addition, Copts continue to face discrimination in relation to appointments to high public office, including the security agencies. Following an assault on a church in upper Egypt in September, thousands of people, mainly Copts, organized protests on October 9 in Cairo's Maspero Square to call for an end to discrimination and respect for the right to freedom of religion.

The military responded with excessive force, including driving armoured vehicles at speed into the crowds. The incident reportedly left at least 26 Copts, one Muslim, and one soldier dead, and some 321 people seriously injured.

The SCAF has utterly dismissed calls for an independent inquiry into what happened. Instead, the army is investigating itself. They seem more intent on punishing those who have raised concerns about the incident. Notably, high-profile Egyptian blogger and activist Alaa Abd El Fattah, a prominent leader in the January 25 revolution, has been detained since October 30 simply because he has raised concerns about the fact that the military is in charge of investigating itself for the Maspero Square incident. More than one month later, he remains in detention, with an appeals court refusing just yesterday to free him while his trial is pending.

It is estimated that during the past three decades Egypt has witnessed some 15 major attacks against Copts, but in the past ten months alone, since the January 25 revolution, there have been at least six attacks on churches and/or clashes between Muslims and Copts—so 15 over 30 years, and now six over ten months.

On March 4, Shahedain Church, in a village south of Cairo, was destroyed. On March 8 there were violent clashes between Muslims and Copts in a Cairo neighbourhood, home to a large Coptic community of garbage collectors, leaving ten dead. In April, clashes left two dead. In May there were attacks against two churches: Mar Mina Church and the Virgin Mary Church, leaving at least 15 dead. In September, Mar Girgis Church in Aswan was destroyed. On October 4 and 9, Coptic protesters were attacked by soldiers and unidentified armed thugs.

• (1320)

In the face of this very worrying pattern of violence and attacks, there has been virtually no response from the authorities. It's in keeping with long-standing official attitudes, when faced with religious violence in Egypt, to favour so-called reconciliation by convening meetings of religious leaders rather than taking steps to identify and prosecute offenders and hold them accountable for these very serious human rights abuses.

In the new Egypt, Copts also continue to be dramatically under-represented in appointments to high public office, such as university presidents or key security positions.

Authorities have done nothing to end a ban on building houses of worship or restoring existing ones, which has led to many churches in the country being closed down or destroyed because they allegedly do not have the right permission.

In May a committee was set up to prepare an anti-discrimination law and a unified law for places of worship. The penal code was amended to establish a minimum fine of \$5,000 U.S. for all forms of discrimination, including religious discrimination, but no law has yet been issued regarding the construction of religious buildings.

Canada can and should be active with respect to these specific concerns about the ongoing persecution of Coptic Christians but also wider concerns about continuing deeply entrenched discrimination against women and the ongoing and very worrying overall pattern of widespread human rights violations in Egypt ten months after a revolution that promised a very different human rights future.

Canada should press Egyptian authorities to free Alaa Abd El Fattah; to launch an investigation into the Maspero Square violence that is conducted by a truly independent body; to review, amend, or abolish all laws that are in any way discriminatory, including on the basis of religion or sex; to change all existing laws and practices that discriminate against religious minorities, including article 98(f) of the penal code, which criminalizes the exploitation of religion to disturb national peace, and also presidential decree 291/2005, which restricts repairs and expansion of Christian churches.

Canada should call on the Egyptian authorities to commit to an agenda that will ensure women are central to shaping the new Egypt and that equality and non-discrimination are absolutely central to the country's reform process. Amnesty International has detailed recommendations in this area, which you will find in the report I have left with you, "Women Demand Equality in Shaping New Egypt".

Finally, Canada should call on Egyptian authorities at all levels, including those who are going to be taking their place through recent and ongoing parliamentary elections, to commit to Amnesty International's human rights manifesto for Egypt, which we've called, very simply, "10 Steps for Human Rights". It includes such obvious steps as repealing Egypt's emergency law and bringing the country's perpetual state of emergency to an end. The country, as I'm sure most or all of you know, has been under emergency rule since 1967—the year Canada marked its centennial—44 years of emergency rule that quite frankly has been nothing but a guise for severe human rights violations, 44 years of emergency rule that sadly has been expanded rather than being restricted over the past ten months.

I have left you with a copy of our human rights manifesto and would really urge that you take a look at it. I think it's quite clear and concise, and it very helpfully highlights the key changes the international community should be pressing Egypt to live up to.

Those are my comments, both with respect to the particular situation facing Coptic Christians in the country and some wider concerns: the plight of women and the overall human rights situation. I'm of course very open and interested to hear what questions or comments you may have.

• (1325)

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Neve.

Given the fact that this is December 6, we face an unusual scheduling issue. There's a moment of silence in the House of Commons that's going to restrict our time here a little bit, in a way I had not thought of when we started this meeting. In order to make everything fit in, I'll actually keep everybody down to four minutes per question and answer. I think that's the only way we can juggle things and still deal with everything on our plate.

With that in mind, we normally start with a question from a Conservative government member. Mr. Sweet.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'll be mindful of the time.

I noted quite a number of things here, but I think I'll make sure that I streamline them a bit.

You mentioned that one oppressive regime is now being replaced with another. Certainly, with the numbers that you quoted regarding a tax on Coptic Christians for 30 years, and then in the last year, I believe it was—

• (1330)

**Mr. Alex Neve:** Ten months.

**Mr. David Sweet:** —that really creates a significant problem as far as the whole community is concerned. Obviously you have property destroyed, you have people killed, you have people maimed. With these restrictions, where you can't rebuild or build churches, you can virtually drive people of faith into the ground, with no facilities left, because they can't get a permit. Is that too far-fetched as a statement?

**Mr. Alex Neve:** I think the concerns on both fronts are very well founded. Obviously the concern about violence, physical safety, and security is paramount. The fact that so many Coptic Christians have been attacked and so many killed, often in or around their places of worship, is wholly and entirely unacceptable. But that this happens in the wider context of discrimination, including measures that make it very difficult to maintain places of worship, is part of a wider pattern, obviously, that leaves a religious community very much under siege. I think the international community needs to be attentive to all aspects of the ways in which Coptic Christians are experiencing abuses, clearly pressing for measures to be taken to respond to the physical attacks, but also these other kinds of law reform and other initiatives that need to go forward to make sure that religious freedom is truly able to flourish.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Even that is complex. If you have a regime that has decided to be decidedly discriminatory—you mentioned the \$5,000 fines for religious discrimination—if they execute that law in the same way that the laws in Pakistan are executed, then it only ends up going toward one community. We've already seen the results

of that, with one of our witnesses actually giving his life in that regard, trying to fight those laws.

We've had some very strong testimony here regarding the Muslim Brotherhood. Could I ask you how you'd characterize that group?

**Mr. Alex Neve:** Amnesty International doesn't take positions on political parties per se. We obviously have a lot to say to them, whether they're seeking office or whether they have assumed power, with respect to their human rights responsibilities. We will be very attentive to that with respect to the Muslim Brotherhood to ensure that all of these concerns, but particularly in equality and non-discrimination agendas—religious minorities and women are right at the top of the list—will be something they are truly held to account about.

**Mr. David Sweet:** I hope you watch very closely.

Lastly are the actions of the security forces. From your observations, is there evidence that some of this lack of enforcement...? I understand that in some of the cases of violence there has been evidence of their participation. Do you sense that there's evidence that this goes up to higher ranks than simply individual security forces making these decisions on their own?

**Mr. Alex Neve:** We don't have a conclusive answer to that, but certainly we are aware of those concerns. That's all the more reason why, going back to the Maspero Square incident from October, we're insisting that there actually needs to be a thorough and independent investigation that will look at not only the fine points of the tragedy as it unfolded in the square, but actually the wider context in which that all happened. I think this would be an important opportunity to ensure that those kinds of concerns and questions be fully examined.

Obviously, to this point in time the Armed Forces Council is showing absolutely no interest in convening any such independent investigation. I think the international community needs to maintain the pressure for that to happen, but may actually need to step in and somehow ensure that something along those lines happens.

**Mr. David Sweet:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Mr. Marston, please.

**Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As usual, the information you bring is very comprehensive.

We had before us a couple of meetings ago Reverend El Shafie, of One Free World International. His conclusions matched yours almost identically. In fact, he was extremely passionate about the situation facing all Christian communities there, not just the Coptic Christians.

When we give consideration to this, what do you see the reaction of the international community being, particularly the U.S. and the EU? There was a great deal of pride taken, almost, in the fact that the spring, which everyone was excited about at the time, was happening.

• (1335)

**Mr. Alex Neve:** Throughout this year, our sense has been that the international community has been stumbling a bit to keep pace with the changes happening in Egypt. We saw that even at the very outset as the revolution, as it's come to be called, began to take place. First, the western community, very much including Canada, was caught off guard. But second, it was slow to get with what was happening. There was reluctance to give up on Hosni Mubarak. There was nervousness about fully and unconditionally supporting the demands for democratic change that were unfolding. Countries, eventually also including Canada, finally did get with the program and caught up to it.

Now, again, things are shifting a bit. Obviously, as we move into a phase of elections, and given the fact that decidedly religious parties, the Muslim Brotherhood being an obvious example, are so prominent, governments have again been left feeling a little bit off base and not knowing too much how to react. That's why we're putting in front of the Egyptian government, and in front of the entire international community, this human rights framework. This is the recipe for real change in Egypt. What countries really need to focus on now is not nuanced positions and being equivocal about what's unfolding. They need to focus on taking a strong position on these key human rights concerns.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** When we go back to the Iranian revolution in the 1970s, that began as a student revolution. As it evolved, the clerics hijacked it. We have concerns being raised here by government members and others about the Muslim Brotherhood. For the elections, we understood that they were supposed to have only a certain level of seats, about 40, if I recall, but they ran 80 candidates. It's almost as if something similar to Iran is happening. I don't know whether it has the official backing of the mullahs. It's one of those things that's making us very uneasy.

**Mr. Alex Neve:** I think we have to watch it closely. As I said, I don't think the answer is to be barring or prohibiting certain political parties, etc. Clearly, democracy means democracy, and human rights means human rights. What has gone wrong in so many countries in the past, certainly including Iran, and what has also been so problematic in Egypt, is that the human rights obligations, the human rights frameworks, have been put in the back seat compared to other geopolitical considerations. That can't happen this time in Egypt.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** Even though Mubarak has left, his regime had a terrible human rights record, to begin with, and his same people in the military are still very much in charge over there.

How's my time, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** You have gone four minutes.

**Mr. Wayne Marston:** Okay. I'm going to stop, then, because we want to be sure to be in the House.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Mr. Hiebert.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC):** I appreciate the synopsis you provided, or the history, actually, of the violence that has occurred against religious minorities, specifically the Coptic Christians, over the last number of years.

I have reviewed your ten recommendations, and I'm asking myself who is going to implement these changes. Certainly the interim military leadership can't be expected to bring about these changes. That leads us to speculation as to who's going to form the next government and whether they will have the willingness, the determination, to bring about these kinds of changes, which clearly would be unique to the Egyptian people. They haven't had them in forever, or for a very long period of time. Do you think the Muslim Brotherhood, since they are expected to form a government, would bring about these kinds of changes? Do you think they would feel international pressure? Do you think they would care?

**Mr. Alex Neve:** Well, I'm a human rights advocate. I live in eternal optimism, but determination as well. I think part of what we need to see happen with respect to Egypt, whether it's the Muslim Brotherhood or anyone else who comes to govern or share in governing the country, is that for the first time there be some meaningful pressure from within. And I think the growth of an incredible movement within Egypt around democratic and human rights issues has been breathtaking and inspiring over this past year. That's there. That is going to remain, and that's going to be a pressure that any ruling party is going to have to contend with.

But at the same time, this time—which we have not seen in decades—it needs to be matched by a meaningful, principled, and sustained international pressure. For years, and in fact decades, Hosni Mubarak was given a free ride with respect to the terrible pattern of human rights violations in the country: no pressure, virtually no criticism, and thus no surprise that there was no change.

So I think the combination of those two things, really recognizing the fact that there has been monumental change from within the country that's not going away... There are other contending forces, obviously, but it's there and it's going to be pressing for change.

I also think we shouldn't necessarily give up on the notion that the armed forces can't and shouldn't be expected to implement some of these changes over the course of the next year or so that they will still have presidential power. For instance, this issue about emergency rule has to become a non-starter for the international community. That has to be right at the top of the list of what all governments—our own government, the U.S. government—are demanding of this government, this current government, this transitional government.

Some of the longer-term issues of reform are things that could certainly be initiated now and with the current government will not be completed; they are things that will play out over years and in fact over generations.

•(1340)

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Do you think they would, though? Because they don't have the mandate. They're in an emergency rule situation. Could the military actually legitimately claim to be representing the Egyptian people in bringing about these changes over whatever time period they have left?

**Mr. Alex Neve:** They absolutely have the power to do so.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** They have the power—

**Mr. Alex Neve:** The powers they have under their constitutional decree are far-reaching and in fact are wider than the powers that whoever eventually becomes Egypt's elected president would have. So they do certainly have the power to do all of this.

**Mr. Russ Hiebert:** Does Amnesty monitor elections?

**The Chair:** Mr. Hiebert, you're out of time. Sorry about that.

Mr. Andrews, please.

**Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Apologies from Professor Cotler, who couldn't be here today. I'm filling in for him. He knows way more about this than I do, so please accept my apologies.

I have two questions that intrigued me during your presentation. First, at the very opening of your remarks you talked about the gentleman who's going back to jail—today, tomorrow...? You just briefly mentioned it in the beginning. Could you elaborate on that for me? Has Canada done everything it can to help this individual? Could you just explain it a little?

**Mr. Alex Neve:** I know that was a bit sly of me, because it was off topic. It's the same world region, but Bahrain, not Egypt; it's very much on our minds because his appeal is to be heard tomorrow. So there's the timeliness of it and the fact that it's the same region, and some of the same issues about democracy and that sort of cry for change in the Middle East are obviously what this is all about.

He is a Canadian citizen. He was arrested in Bahrain in March on accusations that he had participated in that country's democratic protests. He was held for a month, during which he was very badly tortured, and there are medical reports that confirm that. He later, through a profoundly unfair trial, was sentenced to a five-year prison term. He does have an appeal pending, which is supposed to be heard tomorrow. There's not a lot of hope that the appeal is going to turn things around; we can obviously keep our fingers crossed that this will be the case. But tomorrow is obviously a crucial day for him there, for if the appeal is unsuccessful, there's a very good chance that he could be taken right back into custody.

We have been raising the case frequently with the government, with Minister of State Ablonczy, who's responsible for consular affairs, of course, and we have welcomed the many ways in which Canada has clearly been providing a lot of consular support to Mr. al-Raas. We've been disappointed that we've not been able to get clarity that the government has clearly gone on the record with the Bahraini government in opposing the charges and demanding that he be freed.

That's what we're looking for: not simply watching and monitoring the case, but making it very clear to the Bahraini government that this is a violation of international human rights standards to send anyone to prison simply because they peacefully protested, and that this has to come to an end.

•(1345)

**Mr. Scott Andrews:** In your testimony you talked about the number of people who were killed for freedom of religion. My question is, and the analysts have put this together, do you actually believe that the right to freedom of religion will ever be there under the post-Mubarak era? Is it possible? What are the obstacles that might prevent this from happening, and how can Canada help? How tough is that really going to be?

**Mr. Alex Neve:** We wouldn't pretend it's easy. Is it possible? Yes, of course, it's possible. Anything's possible if the will is there. Are there formidable changes that need to happen? Yes.

I've touched on some of the changes. Some of them are law reform issues that need to be dealt with and dealt with urgently, both in terms of removing some discriminatory provisions that exist in Egyptian law, and also in terms of strengthening protective measures. We also need to see a move towards finally in Egypt a commitment to ending impunity for human rights violations. That very much arises in this area of attacks against religious minorities such as the Copts, but more generally as well—the fact that people can carry out the kinds of attacks that I've enumerated in my presentation and you've heard about from others, against religious communities, and then pay absolutely no price. So that's a rule of law and justice reform agenda that needs to be key here as well.

But more fundamentally, obviously, cultural change needs to happen. That's long term. It's important, and Canada should absolutely be looking for ways to support that kind of change as well, not just the quick and immediate law reform and other kinds of changes that are so necessary in the short term, but that longer term agenda as well.

**The Chair:** That wraps up that round. Thank you.

Our final questioner will be Ms. Grewal and then we'll go in camera. Ms. Grewal, please.

**Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC):** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr. Neve.

Mr. Neve, do you believe that the violence and discrimination against the Coptic Christians in Egypt have intensified since the fall of the Mubarak regime? Could you please tell us something about that?



**Mr. Alex Neve:** Yes. It's always difficult to conclusively measure human rights violations. We're asked to do so all the time. Is it better in this country than it was last year? Is it worse here or worse there? At the end of the day, it's impossible to do so. We have, however, signalled that over these last ten months it certainly does appear that we've witnessed a deterioration in the situation for Coptic Christians, not to suggest that things had been good, obviously, before the fall of Mubarak.

Certainly we've pointed to the fact that there has been an upsurge in attacks and violence, and that there have been many more attacks, as I said in my remarks, during that ten-month period than there were in the decades previous to that. That's not to suggest that one is better than the other. We don't want to privilege the experience of some victims over others, but it has been a very difficult and worrying time, and it has been accompanied by a complete failure to start to see the kind of turn-around that is necessary to improve things. In other words, we're not seeing security forces start to demonstrate greater willingness to get in there and provide protection. We're not yet seeing some of the law reform steps that are so necessary. We aren't yet seeing a change and ensuring that Coptic Christians more regularly take up high positions within government to end exclusions and discrimination in that respect as well.

So it has been a very worrying time.

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** What can Canada do to encourage and require Egypt to respect and protect the rights of its Coptic minority?

**Mr. Alex Neve:** I think some of the suggestions I've raised as to the kinds of law reform steps that need to be taken should be prominent in Canada's dealings with Egypt. I think there are some very concrete individual cases and individual situations that can be raised—for example, demanding that there be an independent investigation into the Maspero Square violence in October, and freeing of the blogger, an activist who has been detained because he raised concerns about what happened in Maspero Square.

But more widely, I think what is so crucial is that Canada get behind a very strong human rights agenda, along the lines of what we've proposed to the Egyptian government, and make that the centrepiece of our dealings with the Egyptian government and be working with other countries to really ensure that it becomes the mantra of the international community in the years to come.

●(1350)

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** What is the role of the Egyptian security forces with respect to discrimination and violence against the Copt community? What is its role?

**Mr. Alex Neve:** I think there have been times when concerns have been raised that there may be some officers who played a direct role in some of the violence. Obviously we've pointed to concerns that security officials were responsible for violence in Maspero Square. I've highlighted the concerns about them having reportedly driven their armoured vehicles at high speeds right through Coptic protesters. That's one level.

I think the wider and long-standing concern, though, has been that security forces in Egypt have simply not done enough, and in some instances they have done virtually nothing to provide protection to Coptic communities in the face of violence. They have abandoned them to sectarian violence when in fact they have a binding legal responsibility to intervene to ensure protection.

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** Mr. Chair, do I have any time left?

**The Chair:** No, actually you have three seconds.

**Mrs. Nina Grewal:** That's fine.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Neve. I appreciate, as I always do, and as we all do, your presence and your insight, and in this particular case as well the very useful context you've provided both in your oral testimony and your written submission. We very much appreciate it. Thank you for coming here.

**Mr. Alex Neve:** Okay, thank you.

**The Chair:** We have to move in camera, colleagues, and we have to be quick about it. I think we'll go directly in camera and start our session.

This is not a high-security thing, so if Mr. Neve hasn't left the room yet the world won't cave in while we're going in camera. So let's do that.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*





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