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EGYPT | Church Buildings Legalized

Egyptian authorities legalized 70 church buildings for worship purposes on May 19. The decision was issued following a meeting of the government committee that oversees the legalization of churches, chaired by the Prime Minister. This decision brings the total number of churches that have been legalized since the committee commenced its mandate in 2016 to 1,638.

The legalization of church buildings remains a controversial issue. Local authorities demolished a church building in Koum Al-Farag, Al-Behera governorate, on May 20 following sectarian protests. The one-story building had been used for worship purposes for 15 years. A few years ago, local Muslims constructed a mosque next to the building, hoping to prevent it from being legalized as a church. According to an ancient Islamic tradition (or common law), churches are prevented from being formally recognized or displaying any Christian symbols if a mosque is built next to them.

Recently, two additional floors had been constructed in order to accommodate the growing congregation, which sparked sectarian tension. To prevent further escalation, local authorities demolished both the church building and the mosque that was built next to it. In total, 14 Christians, including the local priest and four women, were arrested when they tried to stop the authorities from demolishing the building.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW welcomes the legalization of more churches in Egypt, and we encourage the administration to continue on the path of reforming legislation and addressing societal attitudes and practices that restrict the right to freedom of religion or belief. While the legalization of these places of worship is a welcome development, we remain concerned by the destruction of both the church and mosque in Koum Al-Farag, which is not an effective way of addressing sectarian tensions. The government must work with local authorities to formulate civic interventions that address and transform the societal attitudes underpinning sectarian tensions."

Although there have been noticeable improvements in the treatment of the Christian community during President Sisi's time in office, sectarian incidents continue to occur in

certain localities, including the kidnap and forced conversion of Christian women. Such incidents are usually resolved through extra-legal community reconciliation sessions, which are often characterized by bias and unbalanced rulings that deprive victims, primarily Christians, of justice. CSW continues to call for those responsible for such incidents to be held to account through the legal system.

On May 1, the Coptic Orthodox Parish of Al-Manofyia withdrew from a civil society initiative to contain and resolve sectarian incidents via inter-community dialogue. The Egyptian Family House, a joint initiative that was created in 2011 by the Coptic Orthodox Church and Al-Azhar, aims to strengthen religious harmony and create grassroots solutions to sectarian tensions.

The parish issued a statement in which it condemned the lack of action on the part of the Egyptian Family House in the case of the abduction of Rania Abdul-Masseih Halim, a Christian woman who disappeared on April 22 and subsequently reappeared in a video in which she claims to have converted to Islam and no longer wanted anyone to search for her. Her family believes these claims were made under duress.