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CONGRESSIONAL—EXECUTIVE
COMMISSION ON CHINA

ASSISTANT REPUBLICAN WHIP

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515–3816

June 1, 2007

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The Honorable Condoleezza Rice
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Rice:

I am writing out of deep concern over the impending deportation of Mr. Sameh Khouzam (A# 75 795 693), who is currently being held at the York County Prison in Pennsylvania. The Second Circuit Court granted a stay of deportation to Egypt based on a finding that it was “more likely than not” that he would be tortured upon return. Reportedly, the U.S. Government received assurances from the Egyptian Government that Mr. Khouzam would not be tortured were he to be returned to Egypt. I am deeply disturbed that the U.S. Government appears to have taken this assurance at face value in light of the extensive evidence of torture against Egyptian citizens, particularly against religious minorities. I respectfully request your immediate attention to this case in order to prevent the deportation of Mr. Khouzam to Egypt.

As you may know, Mr. Khouzam fled Egypt in 1998, due to pressure from the Egyptian government to forcibly change his religion. He, and other family members, were detained and imprisoned by the government during these reported attempts at forcible conversion. Mr. Khouzam then fled the country fearing for his life. During the flight to the United States, Egyptian officials notified U.S. officials that Mr. Khouzam was wanted for murder. When he landed in the U.S., authorities noticed that he was injured (due to Egyptian security officials’ actions) and placed him in the hospital. After his release from the hospital, he was imprisoned in the U.S. due to Egyptian government requests, despite the absence of credible evidence and the lack of autopsy reports substantiating the “murder” charges. Mr. Khouzam was imprisoned in the U.S. for eight years, until he was granted parole based on a Second Circuit Court decision that were he to be deported he would most certainly face torture at the hands of the Egyptian Government.

By all accounts, Mr. Khouzam is an upstanding, contributing member of the communities in which he works, lives, and worships in Pennsylvania. It came as a great surprise to everyone when Mr. Khouzam, following instructions, voluntarily reported to immigration authorities to check in with them on Tuesday, May 29, 2007, but was then detained, imprisoned, and informed that the Egyptian Government provided “assurances” that he would not be tortured, therefore, he would be deported on Friday, June 1, 2007. Mr. Khouzam’s lawyers requested an extension of the stay of deportation; the request was granted for an extension until Thursday, June 7, 2007.

Madam Secretary, I am deeply disturbed that the U.S. Department of State and Department of Homeland Security would, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, accept at face value a promise from the Egyptian Government. Over the years, I have personally worked on numerous cases in Egypt in which the government has used torture against its own citizens. The most recent *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* issued by the U.S. Department of State report that there were “numerous, credible reports that security forces tortured and mistreated prisoners and detainees,” that security forces “employ torture to extract information or force confessions,” and that “human rights monitors believe the use of torture by police [is] widespread.” Further, the *Country Reports* describe the torture methods used by Egyptian security officials, “Principal methods of torture reportedly employed by the police and the SSIS included stripping and blindfolding victims; suspending victims from a ceiling or doorframe with feet just touching the floor; beating victims with fists, whips, metal rods, or other objects; using electrical shocks; and dousing victims with cold water. Victims frequently reported being subjected to threats and forced to sign blank papers for use against themselves or their families should they in the future lodge complaints about the torture. Some victims, including male and female detainees and children, reported sexual assaults or threats of rape against themselves or family members.” Even further, the *Report* states that “Security forces continued to mistreat and torture prisoners, arbitrarily arrest and detain persons, hold detainees in prolonged pretrial detention, and engage in mass arrests.”

The State Department, as have numerous human rights organizations, has documented persecution by the government of Egypt against Coptic Christians. All this evidence and the clear patterns of the use of torture as well as persecution against religious minorities indicate that the “assurances” of the Egyptian Government on these matters are *not* reliable.

In addition to evidence in this year’s *Country Report*, the U.S. Department of State has chronicled various cases of discrimination, harassment, and persecution experienced by Copts in Egypt over the past decade. One case cited, which underscores the Egyptian Government’s willingness to use torture to force confessions, includes the horrific arrest and torture of over 1,200 Christians in the infamous Al-Kosheh case in 1998 and the killing of 20 Christians in late December 1999 in Al-Kosheh and the surrounding villages of Dar el-Salam and Awlad Toq West. When asked about this case, the Minister of Interior in 1999 stated that all the wounds on the 1,200 arrested Christians were “simply old surgery wounds.”

Other reports detail the myriad problems with church repair, construction, and destruction by the Egyptian government. On February 19, 2002, soldiers from the Egyptian Army used bulldozers to raze to the ground over 25 meters of the perimeter wall of The Patmos Centre, a Coptic Orthodox facility for handicapped children. The Centre was also targeted by military authorities in 1996, 1997 and 2001. On February 10, 2002, a group of armed men stormed the newly renovated Church of the Virgin Mary in the village of Banni Wallmes as the priest and the congregation were holding the consecration ceremony. The church and 15 homes of Christians were burned. On December 16, 2001, the Mayor of Al-Ubor city ordered his police forces to destroy the only church in the city just hours after church officials opened the building and held the first prayer meeting. Finally, on February 25, 2001, over 100 policemen, led by a small group of lieutenants and generals, destroyed the Church of St. Paul with five bulldozers.

Another account reveals that four Coptic Christian college students, Peter Kamel, Ishak Yessa, John Fokha, and Andrew Saeed, who were traveling through the Sinai were arrested on January 26, 2004. These young men were imprisoned, under charges of allegedly disturbing national unity, simply for possessing a number of Bibles and Christian religious tapes during their travels through the Sinai.

In 2005, extremists in the Egyptian media incited a week-long string of mob violence against the Coptic community of Alexandria, Egypt. A number of reports detail attacks on Alexandria's Coptic community, attacks which include the stabbing of a Coptic nun, a series of mob attacks on the St. George Coptic Orthodox Church and other churches, and vandalism of Coptic businesses and property. These attacks were incited by several militant Islamist media newspapers and fanatical religious leaders. While the Egyptian government carefully monitors and closes down publications critical of President Mubarak, accounts make clear that the government has tacitly permitted Islamist publications, such as *al-Asbua* and *al-Midan*, both of which specialize in anti-American statements and public endorsements of *jihad*, to publish and promote inflammatory propaganda.

One recent report suggests that an attack was carried out earlier this month in Bimha (also known as Bamha) in the Ayat district south of Cairo. Reports suggest that this event was not orchestrated by extremist or militant groups but it was rather a "call to action" presented to local Muslims as they attended their Friday prayers. The targeted group was the local Coptic Christian community. According to the report, property was burned, electrical lines were cut, people were hospitalized, and homes were destroyed. Police reportedly knew of the planned attacks, but only became involved after the destruction was complete.

There are also many reports available which detail the abduction and forced conversion of Coptic Christian girls to Islam. Extremist groups, with the apparent cooperation of Egyptian businesses, have engaged in forced conversion. There are accounts of young girls being taken to secluded areas of stores, forced to sign documents declaring their conversion to Islam, then being physically assaulted and even raped. Pope Shenouda has made statements about these forced conversions and urged the government to find the girls and prosecute the criminals involved. The Pope has stated, "I have received so many letters about what's happening to the Christian girls who go to supermarket stores to shop. At the store they tell them that they have won and have to go upstairs to receive their award or prize. After that we don't know what's happening to these girls upstairs ... I see that what's happening will create a religious clash in the country. I'm urging the police to take serious action against what's happening ... We don't want more disasters to happen to us. We've had enough." One specific case involves 18-year-old Ingy Helmy Georgy Labibe. Ms. Labibe's status as a minor under Egyptian law prohibits her religious conversion. It appears that there has not been adequate police attention to returning the girl to her family and to apprehending and prosecuting the perpetrators.

While Article 46 of the Egyptian Constitution guarantees freedom of belief and religion to Egypt's citizens, numerous reports, including the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*, make it clear that such freedom is not a reality in Egypt today. Despite the Constitution's provision, converts from Islam are unable to change their name or identification

information, while converts to Islam are free to do so. There are numerous reports of the harassment and imprisonment of converts from Islam.

While this letter has focused on the attacks against the Christian minority in Egypt, majority religious believers, Sunni Muslims, fare no better in terms of treatment by security officials when detained and/or imprisoned. International human rights organizations document extensive use of torture against Egyptian Muslims while in Government custody as well as to extract forced confessions for crimes that may or may not have been committed. The U.S. Government has an obligation to strongly raise the cases of all people in Egypt who are falsely detained, and who are tortured by Egyptian security and police officials.

Madam Secretary, a panel of three federal judges on the Second Circuit Court of Appeals has reviewed the evidence in this case and concluded that Mr. Khouzam would be at a real risk of torture should he return to Egypt. It makes no sense that the Executive Branch would then attempt to override this finding by relying on promises of humane treatment from a government with a known record of torture.

The United States has long been a safe haven for those fleeing persecution and oppression at the hands of their government. Despite our well-founded concerns about security issues, we cannot abide by our principles, while at the same time simply returning to the hand of known torturers those seeking the protection of our government. Given the very clear pattern of Egypt's use of torture, there is every reason to keep Mr. Khouzam in the United States under our protection.

Thank you for your immediate attention to this case. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joseph R. Pitts". The signature is stylized with large, bold letters and a prominent "P".

Joseph R. Pitts
Member of Congress

Cc: The Honorable Michael Chertoff, Secretary, Department of Homeland Security
The Honorable Alberto R. Gonzalez, Attorney General, Department of Justice