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Graham Watson MEP
European Parliament
Brussels

Dear Graham,

Thank you for your letter dated 5 March 2010, in which you expressed your concerns regarding religious freedom in Egypt. The European Union remains concerned about religious freedoms in relation to Copts and other groups.

The EU is aware of the cases of Mr. Mohammed Hegazy and Mr. Maher El-Mo'otahsssem Bellah El-Gohary and follows them closely through the EU Delegation in Cairo which, in collaboration with Member States' embassies, monitors their trials as they seek to have their new converted status recognised.

The EU works closely with the human rights groups and civil society organisations active in this field and holds regular consultations with them regarding the progress in the field of discrimination based on religion or belief, as well as other human rights issues.

The EU frequently raises issues related to religious tolerance and the problems faced by religious minorities in meetings with the Egyptian Government. The framework for relations between Egypt and the EU ensures regular dialogue on political matters and human rights. In 2007 the EU and Egypt agreed a joint European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) Action Plan that sets down priorities and objectives for closer co-operation and partnership. In the field of human rights, the Action Plan provides for the EU and Egypt to work together to combat all forms of discrimination, intolerance, racism and xenophobia and for the promotion of "efforts, in Egypt and the EU, towards increasing tolerance, understanding and respect for all religions and cultures".

The EU and Egypt hold regular consultations in the framework of the Sub-committee on Political Matters: Human Rights and Democracy – International and regional issues. One of the roles of this Sub-committee is to take stock of progress in the implementation of Egypt's ENP Action Plan commitments. It met for the third time 10-11 March 2010 in Brussels. The EU again expressed concern about the treatment of religious minorities, regretting for instance that the adoption of a unified code for all places of worship, which would cut administrative obstacles to church-building and repair, has been postponed.

The EU is committed to continue to promote human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, in Egypt at all appropriate opportunities. Egypt has requested an enhanced status of its relations with the EU. We have made it clear that progress on this will need to build on the achievement of the ENP Action Plan, including in areas related to human rights.

Yours sincerely

Catherine Ashton

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