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Egypt's Embattled Christians Seek Room in America

By Lucette Lagnado

Kirolos Andraws had every reason to be excited about the January uprising in his native Egypt, figuring democracy would bring hope for young people like him.

Then one day in February, says Mr. Andraws, a gang of thugs beat him and told him, "you deserve to die." His offense, he says: refusing to convert to Islam.

In late March, Mr. Andraws, a 23-year-old engineer, used a tourist visa to board an Egyptair flight for New York City. He let a room in a friend's apartment, hired an immigration lawyer and applied for asylum. He has survived mainly on wages and tips from jobs as a cook, cashier and delivery man.

"I have no other option," says Mr. Andraws, who found refuge at a Queens church that's become a way station for Copts arriving in New York.

Mr. Andraws is one of thousands of Coptic Christians—followers of an ancient form of Christianity with its own language and rituals—who have come to the U.S. to escape rising persecution in Egypt.

For decades Copts have suffered attacks by Islamists who view them as "kafir"—Arabic for nonbelievers. But there is now a sense among Middle East experts that they have become more vulnerable since the revolution.

This year, mobs have looted and attacked Coptic churches, homes and shops throughout Egypt. Churches have been burned down, and one Copt had his ear cut off by a Muslim cleric invoking Islamic law.

Strong gains by Islamist parties in the recent elections have further raised fears among the Christian minority that they won't have a place in the new Egypt.

The plight of the nation's roughly eight million Copts poses a quandary for the U.S. The pivotal Middle East ally receives \$1.3 billion annually in military aid, and the administration has riled some critics who say it has failed to strongly rebuke the transitional rulers amid recent violence against women, Copts and other minorities.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a federal advisory agency, asked the State Department to place Egypt on its list of "countries of particular concern"—egregious violators of religious freedoms. The department declined, saying that its goal is to work with the Egyptian government to improve conditions for Christians.

Kathleen Fitzpatrick, a deputy assistant secretary of state, says her department has been "very concerned with the attacks on the Copts in Egypt in recent months," and has shared its views with "the highest levels of the Egyptian government."

Mark Hetfield, a senior vice president at HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, argues that any failure to safeguard the Copts in their homeland could be perilous, opening an immigration floodgate if Christians conclude there is no hope for them in the new Egypt.

Throughout the Middle East, "Democratization has resulted in ethnic cleansing," Mr. Hetfield says bluntly.

Some members of Congress want the administration to take a stronger stand. Rep. Chris Smith, (R., N.J.), a senior member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee who chairs its human rights subcommittee, notes that in years past America has helped Soviet Jews and Christians from South Asia make new lives in America. He argues that the U.S. should do the same for the Copts. "The Copts are the canaries in the coal mine—they are the barometer of Egypt—and the canary is gasping," he says.

For Copts with the means and determination to head to the U.S., their first stop is often at the door of a welcoming church.

Mr. Andraws, for one, made his way to the St. Mary and St. Antonios church In Ridgewood, Queens. Father Michael Sorial, a priest there, says that between March and October of 2011, his congregation received hundreds of new parishioners—all recent arrivals from Egypt. By contrast, in that same period in 2010, the church had only 75 new Egyptian worshipers.

"A lot of Copts aren't able to live in their own land anymore," laments Father Luke Awad of the St. George Coptic Orthodox Church in Brooklyn. A tall man with a jet black beard, he says they are "coming out of desperation." Coptic clerics in other regions, including Jersey City, N.J., and Los Angeles, say they are also seeing an influx.

St. George, built in the 1970s, is located in a staid working-class neighborhood near Bensonhurst. Waves of immigrants have come here over the years—from Italians and Chinese seeking a better life, to Russians escaping the former Soviet Union.

For Coptic Christians, churches and pastors like Father Luke can make the transition smoother. His cramped office has become part food pantry, part pharmacy, part toy store, part social-work clinic. A pharmacist by training, he keeps a bag stuffed with over-the-counter medicines such as Advil and cough syrup—even orthopedic socks for men. To a new arrival, even a toothbrush is expensive, the priest explains.

"A lot of families, if they were in the middle class, they have become way, way poorer," says Father Luke. "Some are well off but the majority has needs."

The Christmas season is especially challenging for those whose relatives remain back in Egypt. St. George is planning a special holiday dinner where broken families can meet and unite in fellowship. There will be food as well as gifts for children, says Father Luke.

Sherien Mehany El Gawly, 39, and her family arrived in Brooklyn in July. Her two daughters, aged 11 and 12, had "a very nice life in Egypt" thanks to her husband's textile business, she says. But after the revolution, their affluent station didn't seem to matter much.

One day, while shopping at an Egyptian grocery, a man singled her out and hurled curse words at her. "I am not veiled and he told me, 'We want to clean our country of you,' " recalls Mrs. El Gawly. Christian women are easily identifiable because they don't cover their hair.

The family's regular house of worship no longer felt safe. Her daughters were frightened when the church appeared on an online list of bombing targets.

The final blow came last summer, soon after a doctor examining her 12-year-old daughter for a fever asked if she had been "chitan"—the Arabic term for removal of the clitoris and other female sexual organs.

"He said, 'I can do it for them now—it is very easy and it is free,' " Mrs. El Gawly said. "I said, 'No, no, no, no.' Then, I ran out of the hospital."

Female genital mutilation was banned under the Mubarak regime and declared illegal. But as Islamists gained sway earlier this year, it was one of the Mubarak era reforms they derided and wanted to strike down. The practice is in danger of making a comeback, says an expert at the World Health Organization.

"Thank God we are far away," says Mrs. El Gawly.

Lately, her husband Maher Shehata has worked as a delivery man and a cashier; the girls attend public school. The four rent a modest apartment on the top floor of a three-family house in Bensonhurst, paying \$1,600 a month. Although the rent is a strain, the family hopes to gain surer economic footing as their application for asylum snakes through the system.

As a balm, Mrs. El Gawly has promised her daughters new dresses for the holidays—just as they always received in Cairo.

On a recent outing to Manhattan, the sisters reveled in dazzling sights like the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center and elaborately decorated department-store windows. It was a stark contrast to the subdued atmosphere Coptic Christians are accustomed to in Egypt.

Mrs. El Gawly says that the girls had stopped believing in Santa Claus back in Egypt. But here, they somehow believe again. "They are waiting for him," their mother says.

For all their excitement, the girls still feel sad. Last week, the older daughter, Miriam, phoned her grandfather in Cairo who told her he missed her and wasn't expecting many visitors for Christmas. After the call, the little girl kept crying and crying, according to her mother.

For some Copts, Brooklyn is only a way station on a circuitous journey.

Dalya Attiatalla, age 36, along with her husband and brother, originally found refuge at Father Luke's Church after arriving in New York in September. She went to St. George's several times a week to pray, and attended Bible classes at night.

In Egypt, Ms. Attiatalla had realized her dream of opening an arts and crafts center, where she would teach children to paint. But her business angered Muslim neighbors in the building who pressured her and her husband to remove a cross and other Christian images.

Ultimately, they ran afoul of authorities who said they didn't have the proper license. Finally, they say, police came one day and destroyed the center using hammers and other objects.

Now she and her husband are in the U.S. trying to start anew. Recently, they left their small apartment in Brooklyn—it had sparse furniture infested with bedbugs—and headed for Dallas, where they have relatives. Ms. Attiatalla isn't without regrets. If she and her husband apply for asylum, she won't be able to return to Egypt, where she left behind a frail and sick father.

"We looked to Egypt as a holy land," she says. "It is very hard to leave your country."

Human rights groups in Egypt have estimated that as many as 100,000 Copts may have left Egypt since the Revolution. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service reports that asylum claims by Egyptian nationals more than doubled this year—to 835 in the fiscal year 2011 ended in September, up from 403 in 2010. Many more enter the U.S. on tourist visas and never make a formal appeal to stay.

Meanwhile, out of about 1.4 million Christians who once lived in Iraq, hundreds of thousands have fled since the fall of Saddam Hussein. The U.S. has given refugee status to thousands.

The asylum process can take months or even years. Applicants must demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution should they return to Egypt. After filling out an eight-page application, they are interviewed by an asylum officer. If their application is rejected, they must either leave America at once or retain a lawyer to appeal.

Immigration lawyer David Barnett says most of his New York-based practice is now focused on Coptic Christians. Mr. Barnett is an observant Jew who prays every day. To accommodate his growing clientele, he employs a native Egyptian as a paralegal and works with a team of Egyptian translators.

Many of the new arrivals, the attorney says, are young professionals who worked as doctors, pharmacists, businessmen.

"If they have money, they are getting out," Mr. Barnett says.

Mr. Barnett charges between \$2,500 and \$3,000 to process the basic asylum claim. If the person is turned down, an appeal may cost an extra \$2,500 to \$6,000—not including the expert witnesses, such as psychiatrists or Egypt specialists.

Those hurdles don't deter people like Hany Attia Eskandar. The 33-year-old abandoned a solid income as an insurance broker in Egypt to come to New York with his pregnant wife and 6-year-old daughter.

Muslim extremists destroyed his church in his native village of Sol in March. He was so shaken he was afraid to leave his wife and daughter alone in their Cairo apartment. His little girl wasn't allowed outside except to go to school.

A few months ago, they made their way to Father Luke's church, where Mr. Eskandar volunteered as a deacon. For a time, they shared a small room in Mrs. El Gawly's apartment.

Mr. Eskandar met with Mr. Barnett, and plans to apply for asylum.

He recently moved his family to Mechanicsburg, Pa., to be near friends. Life is cheaper there, he says, and he was able to find work as a cashier at a gas station.

On Tuesday, his wife Maryan gave birth to a baby boy in a Catholic facility, Holy Spirit Hospital. "I am so happy to have him, and I am happy also that he is an American citizen and that he will not suffer from what we suffered from," says Mr. Eskander.

If granted asylum, Mr. Eskandar hopes for a job in his old field, life insurance. But months of waiting still lie ahead.

Mr. Andraws, the engineer with multiple low-wage gigs, had been waiting for word on his case. After an interview with an asylum office, he was nervous that he failed to adequately convey the threats he'd received back home.

For two weeks, he wondered what he would do if his asylum request was denied. Would he return to Egypt and risk being in the Muslim cleric's web again?

Then late last month, he received an envelope. The message: He could stay in America pending a background check.

"I am kind of free," he says. "I left all my fears back in Egypt so I get a new life."