

**Concerns raised over situation of minorities in Middle East and North Africa** Minority Rights Group International

16 March 2011

Minority Rights Group International said on Wednesday it was seriously concerned about the situation of different ethnic and religious minority groups affected by the violence in North Africa and the Middle East.

'Minorities in Libya, Bahrain and Egypt are all under threat of either being caught up in the violence or in some cases specifically targeted for attack because of their identity,' says Carl Soderbergh, MRG's Director of Policy and Communications.

On Monday afternoon there was heavy fighting reported in Zuwara, a town in northwest Libya, which by Tuesday morning was under the control of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's troops. Zuwara is predominantly populated by Amazigh Berbers, who are the largest non-Arab minority in the country and retain their own culture and language. Other Berber-populated towns, such as Nalut, Jado and Kabaw, are not under military control. (...)

(...)Bahrain's Shia population, although a numerical majority, are politically disadvantaged. The participants of recent anti-government protests mainly belong to this community, as are the targets of the government's armed response. Since the uprising began a month ago, at least ten people have been killed and several hundreds injured. On Tuesday, the government of Bahrain declared a state of emergency, and some 1,500 troops have been sent from the neighbouring states to control the unrest.

There have also been media reports of arrests of Shia activists in Saudi Arabia. In both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, the Shia community wants political reform which will give them increased representation in government.

In Egypt, while MRG welcomes the positive strides towards democracy, the organisation is concerned about continuing attacks against Coptic Christians and their lack of representation in the political process.

On 8 March 2011, over a dozen people were killed and hundreds injured in clashes between Muslims and Coptic Christians. The clashes came as Christians protested the burning of a church. In December 2010, 23 people were killed in a suicide bombing in a church in Alexandria.

'Coptic Christians have been targeted for attack in Egypt many times in recent years. Minority rights protection should be taken very seriously as Egypt writes a new constitution. The country should also ensure the safety of Christians and other minorities who are targeted for attack,' Soderbergh adds. 'The grass-roots and peaceful nature of the protests have been a source of inspiration for many around the world. Let this not be marred by attacks on minority communities.'

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