

Good News at Last



Khalil Sami/Associated Press

The future is getting brighter for babies.

AFTER A YEAR MARKED by a non-stop going battle against bird flu, tainted blood bags and defective medication, the Ministry of Health and Population can finally give itself a pat on the back after the NGO Save the Children issued its newest findings on infant mortality in May.

The latest stats rank Egypt as the global leader in reducing infant deaths. Since 1990, Egypt has reduced infant mortality by 68 percent, from 104 deaths per 1,000 live births down to 30.

The ministry's National Child Survival Program, implemented in conjunction with international and local NGOs, has achieved the impressive result through simple steps. The program focused on increasing immunization rates and targeted respiratory and diarrheal diseases that accounted for approximately one quarter of all childhood deaths.

The immunization program has all but eradicated polio, which in 1990 was still considered endemic in much of Egypt.

Studies have shown that infant mortality is undeniably linked to maternal mortality. Put simply, a child with a mother has a much higher chance of seeing their fifth birthday. Along with projects specifically directed at children, an improvement in the standard

of prenatal and antenatal health care throughout the country has decreased the maternal mortality rate over the same 15-year period by a tremendous 75 percent.

The Ministry of Health is working to continue its success and by 2015 hopes to see a full 75 percent reduction in infant mortality from the 1990 level. To do so, the ministry's programs are shifting their focus to preventing infant death during the first 28 days of life, targeting life-endangering issues including low birth weight, premature birth and inadequate infant care. Efforts will have to focus on rural Upper Egypt, where the infant mortality rate remains high.

Also by 2015, Egyptian health officials hope the ranking will move on the list to a more comparable position to our southern European neighbors across the Mediterranean, and further from developing nations.

Scandinavia remains the world's safest place to be born, with Sweden leading the pack with just 2.8 deaths per 1,000 live births. Closer to home, Iraq, following decades of crippling sanctions, war and occupation has witnessed a 150-percent increase in the infant mortality rate. (CS)

SECTARIAN STRIFE

SECTARIAN SENTIMENT RAN high in parts of the Greater Cairo Area in May as clashes broke out between Muslims and Christians in Al-Ayaat district of Giza.

At least 60 Muslim residents attacked Christian neighbors when rumors spread about a plan to build an extension to a church. Eleven Christians were injured and several cars and shops damaged before authorities quelled the assaults, arresting 35 Muslims.

Police are still investigating and are reportedly seeking 25 additional suspects.

State-run newspapers offered divergent accounts of how the trouble began, with some alleging that the fighting was due to alleged double standards in obtaining licenses to build churches and mosques. The tug of war is reportedly over a room annexed to a church. The room was being used by Muslims for prayer, but legally falls on church grounds, some papers reported. Pundits have criticized both Muslim and Christian preachers for inciting the violence.

The incident sparked a wave of discussion in national media over how to improve interfaith relations.

Shortly after the clashes broke out, a joint reconciliation session was attended by some 50 Azhar sheikhs and Coptic priests. According to the state-owned daily Al-Ahram, representatives of Al-Ayaat district in both the People Assembly and Shura Council attended the meeting, along with security forces and thousands of citizens from the village.

Some Christians were disappointed with the meeting's outcome and consider the truce brokered at the gathering a shallow attempt to placate them. At the end of the session, it was agreed that Muslims would refrain from future violence; the room would be recognized as church property, but could not function as a church. Christians would not be permitted to hang a cross in the room, though Sunday classes would be allowed.

The violence brings back memories of one of the worst sectarian clashes in Egypt, that of the Upper Egyptian village of El-Koshah seven years ago when 20 Copts were killed in a riot following an argument between a Muslim woman and a Coptic shopkeeper. (MH)

CODE CRACKERS

ISLAMIC SCHOLARS in the town of Sirss El-Lyenne, in Minoufiyah, claim to have cracked the code to the Qur'an. The researchers are saying they have unlocked the meaning of 14 isolated letters, known as the "letters of light," that had until now remained a mystery to Muslims.

The discovery was made using a software program designed by a team of computer experts for the purpose of detecting codes within the verses of the Quran. The program, which was created by Islamic scholars based on former sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), ran numerical values assigned to these so-called letters of light.

The research team included former grand mufti of Egypt Sheikh Nasr Farid Wassel, currently a professor of Comparative Studies in Islamic Jurisprudence at Al-Azhar University; Mohamed Shaht Al Guindi, a member of the Islamic Research Council and the Higher Council of Islamic Affairs at Al-Azhar; and Meer Hamza, the Dean of the Faculty of Management and Technology at The Academy of Maritime Transport in Alexandria, among others.

The touted findings, which reportedly took nearly 11 years of research, were announced at a press conference earlier this month at the Four Seasons Nile Plaza, after being reviewed and approved by the Islamic Research Council at Al-Azhar University.

While the Qur'an has always been considered a miracle in itself to Muslims, one wonders if the strength of our faith has become so fickle that we need a secret code to activate it.

No further information about what the find actually means and why it is so important were released by the committee. A source at Al-Azhar, who was approached to shed light on the matter, claimed he had not heard about the discovery. The sheikh did, however, express interest in the news, requesting that it send him whatever information we could track down about the elusive code. (MH)

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

ANOTHER NEWS front in the faith front, Christians railed last month against an April ruling by the Supreme Administrative Court that denied new identity cards to 45 Christians who had converted to Islam

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True Jihad

I LOVE THIS month's cover story, which proved a delightful distraction as we spent much of May focused on the editing of the bt100, sister publication Business Today Egypt's annual ranking of the top 100 companies on the Cairo and Alexandria Stock Exchange. But it's not my favorite story in this issue.

Instead, that distinction is reserved for another of Senior Writer Manal el-Jesri's pieces: "Jihad, Reconsidered," starting on page 24.

In it, el-Jesri argues that a landmark declaration by the chief ideologue of global jihad has passed nearly unnoticed. In May, Sayed Imam El-Sherif, a founder of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, best friend of Ayman El-Zawahri and the man who literally wrote the book on jihad, formally renounced violence from his prison cell south of Cairo.

To put that in perspective, such an announcement was as unthinkable a few short weeks ago as the notion of Martin Luther King leaving church one fine Sunday morning and declaring African-Americans were better off living as slaves.

It's not the end of the terrible use of violence in the service of Islam, but it could be the beginning of a new chapter.

El-Sherif's jailhouse conversion to the cause of non-violence has gone largely unnoticed by Western media (and has been misunderstood by the local press), but as el-Jesri notes, someone was listening: As we went to press, Al-Qaeda appointed an Egyptian (and former Jihad member) in charge of its Afghanistan operations, sending the message that it won't be swayed.

Stay tuned for more next month. et

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and now wanted to return to Christianity.

The legal battle began in 2005 when a group of Copts converted to Islam, allegedly to avoid having to deal with rulings imposed by a Church tribunal or to obtain a divorce. In April, the Supreme Administrative Court ruled that Christians who convert to Islam then return to their original faith, or take up any other faith, cannot approach the Ministry of Interior for new identity cards as it is "impossible to renounce the Islamic faith."

The ruling prompted Christian clergy members to tell the press that they believe this is a "step backward."

The ruling came as Copts in Egypt and abroad fumed over the state's refusal to amend Article 2 of the Constitution, which stipulates that Shariah is the nation's primary source of law and legislation.

It's not just the Copts who are unhappy. Muslim critics have rallied around Christians to protest what they see as an illogical ruling. "As a Muslim, I say that there is no limit to the freedom of religion and, without it, heaven and hell would be [...] meaningless, as the Qur'an assures the individual freedom of belief and disbelief [and] in return, [people] are responsible for their choices," Mohammed Munir Mogahed, a founding member of Egyptians Against Religious Segregation, told the local press. "Islam, in my opinion, is a religion of mercy and justice,

and it cannot be treated as a trap [so that] once you are in it, there is no way out."

According to unofficial estimates reported by Al-Ahram, for every 350 cases of Copts wanting to obtain new identity cards, 100 convert to Islam to obtain a divorce. Another 70 convert to marry a Muslim spouse and allegedly 50 do so to avoid standing before Church disciplinary tribunals.

The Coptic Church does not allow divorce unless one of the two partners has committed adultery or if one of them has converted to another religion. (YM)

POWERS OF PERSUASION

US VICE PRESIDENT Dick Cheney made a brief stop in Egypt last month as part of his tour of the Middle East aimed at persuading major Sunni countries to help lure Iraqi Sunnis to the negotiating table.

After visiting Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, Cheney met with President Hosni Mubarak and Minister of Defense and Military Production Mohamed Tantawi to encourage them to use their influence over Iraq's Sunnis in order to get them to participate in a peace process. Other topics of discussion included minimizing Iran's growing influence in Iraq.

Gamila Ismail, wife of imprisoned political leader Ayman Nour, used Cheney's visit as an opportunity to criticize the Bush administration for failing to pressure Mubarak into making democratic reforms.

Nour, former leader of Al-Ghad party, challenged Mubarak for the presidency in 2005 and is currently serving a five-year prison sentence after being convicted of forging signatures to register his party.

Ismail also claimed Washington had turned its back on her husband's case to win Mubarak's support for US policies in the region. "The American priority is to make Mubarak help them impose the American hegemony on the region and not to safeguard democracy," she told the press after Nour, who has a heart condition and suffers from diabetes, threatened to go on hunger strike mid-May.

Nour's announcement of a hunger strike came after he announced police transporting him from his prison cell to a court hearing allegedly beat him and dragged ►►

by the # NUMBERS

30 the percentage of Egyptian schoolchildren who resort to extreme violence on school premises, according to a study conducted by Dr. Ahmed Zayed, dean of the faculty of arts at Cairo University. The study also found that 42.2 percent of students' parents used corporal punishment to discipline their children.

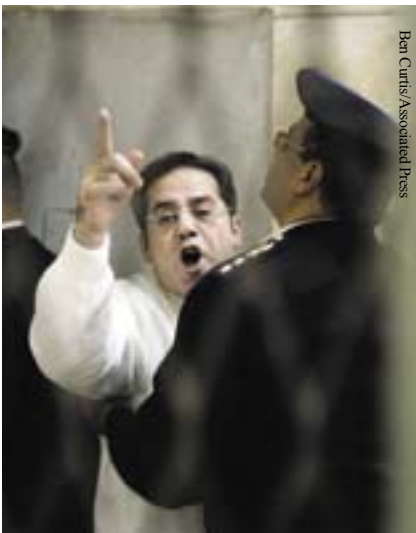
492 the number of students who contracted German and regular measles in Minya since the end of April.

7.7 billion Egyptian pounds, the chunk set aside from the government sale of six large plots of land for a number of development projects. Five days after last month's sale Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif announced that of that sum, LE 3.5 billion would go towards sanitary work around a number of villages, LE 1 billion to hospital emergency services units and LE 3 billion is to be funneled into the maintenance of village schools and the Transport Authority.

1,200 the number of train drivers who signed a petition presented to NDP Secretary-General Gamal Mubarak and the Ministry of Transport. At press time the workers had promised not to strike again if their four demands were met: proper maintenance of the driver's car, 100 percent work-hazard compensation, an adjustment to the cost of living increase and incentive raises.

3 million, the number of tourists expected to flood South Sinai from Uzbekistan. A spokesperson at the embassy of Uzbekistan told the local press last month that he expected a surge in the number of visitors this year, especially those arriving to attend conferences.

5 the number of international companies invited to bid for a contract to clear the North Coast of landmines. At press time the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior had formed a committee to choose the best-qualified firm to execute the two-phase project, which they expect to be completed within the next seven years.



Ayman Nour hopes a hunger strike will bring better treatment.

◀ him down the stairs.

Shortly after the visit, US President George W. Bush telephoned Mubarak to wish him a happy birthday, congratulate him on his son Gamal's marriage and thank him for agreeing to see Cheney. Mubarak celebrated his seventy-ninth birthday this year. (MH)

OUR HERO

EGYPTIAN TELEVANGELIST AMR Khaled has made Time magazine's annual list of the 100 most influential people in the world. The only Arab Muslim on the list, Khaled can be found in the "heroes and pioneers" category. Along with five others on the list, he gave a speech to 600 influential people in a ceremony held last month in New York.

Khaled's is a household name in the Arab world. The young preacher was described by Time as "a rock star for a segment of the Islamic world." His website has far surpassed American talk show host Oprah Winfrey's in popularity and had over 26 million hits last year.

The Time list was unranked, but it is newsworthy to note that Khaled finished thirteenth overall in an online poll of Time's readers. The ranking was based on the average rating of influence (75 out of 100) and

not on the number of voters (6,122). According to this same list, Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling ranked sixth and American Idol competitor Sanjaya Malakar was third.

Khaled's new show *A Message to Co-exist*, is being aired on four satellite channels and is translated into four languages. He currently resides in Birmingham with his wife and two sons. (EK)

BACK TO CELL ONE

THE SUPREME ADMINISTRATIVE Court overturned last month a lower court decision that banned the trial of 40 civilian members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood by military tribunals.

The Brotherhood denounced the ruling as "to be expected from this unjust and corrupt regime."

The lower court ruling brought into serious question the constitutionality of the emergency laws, which allow the trial of civilians by military courts. Analysts expect the People's Assembly to repeal the emergency laws this fall when it convenes to pass a controversial new anti-terror statute authorized by this spring's constitutional referendum.

Lawyers for the Brothers have since lodged another appeal, this one on the grounds that the detainees can't get a fair trial in front of the tribunal when some judges also hold posi-

tions in the executive branch of government.

The 40 suspects are set to be tried on counts of terrorism and money laundering and were scooped up in a wave of arrests earlier this year.

Thirty-three of the defendants are in custody, while seven are being tried in absentia. The trial was set to resume on June 3, 2007.

Military courts have come under fire for not allowing appeals and accepting confessions that are argued to have been obtained under duress while a suspect is in custody.

In related news, President Hosni Mubarak announced he would allow for the first time the appeal of military court verdicts. The exact appeal mechanism remained unclear at press time. (YM)

WHO DROPPED DEBTS?

AFTER EARLY MAY'S Shar m El-Sheikh summit brought together Arab and international leaders — along with other key politicians including the prime minister of Iran and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice — to discuss the future of Iraq, rumors spread that Egypt would drop Iraqi debts.

Iraqi Finance Minister Bayan Jabr gave a statement to the international press during the conference following the summit that Egypt had agreed to cancel \$800 million in debt it is reportedly owed. He further announced that Slovenia, Bulgaria and Poland had agreed to cancel over 80 percent of the debts owed them by the war-torn nation.

During the conference, Jabr said that he expected foreign aid, especially from Asian countries, and that the European Union had agreed to give Iraq \$200 million.

Mubarak told local press that the claim was untrue and nothing of the sort had been promised.

"No decision has been taken on this issue," Mubarak told *El-Messa* newspaper. "These debts are not government debts. This is money that belongs to Egyptian citizens who had dealings with Iraq and the Iraqis."

Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Mufid Shehab later clarified that no decision about loans or debt could be made without the prior approval of Parliament. (YM)



Nasser Nasser/Associated Press

Amr Khaled makes the top 20 of Time's 100 most influential people.

◀ ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK

WITH 31 FEMALE judges sworn in last month, legal eagles could have been forgiven for thinking things were starting to look up for Egypt's judges. The optimists have, however, just been given another conundrum to work out.

Less than a month after the female judges reported to work, the Shura Council passed a decree that had outraged judges protesting outside the doors of the Judges' Syndicate. The new legislation pushes the retirement age for judges to 70 from 68. The Judges' Club promptly called an emergency general meeting and issued a statement claiming that the amendment was a way to ensure that the ruling party stays in power.

Dozens of judges demonstrated at the general assembly meeting, saying those who will benefit from the decision are all loyal to the governing National Democratic Party.

Khaled Korraa, vice-president of the Judges' Club, told the local press, "Those who are about to go into retirement are those who are in harmony with the government and will serve their purposes during the current time." (YM)

HUMAN RIGHTS NATION?

THE UNITED NATIONS General Assembly elected 14 new representatives to its Human Rights Council in two rounds of two secret balloting that concluded on May 17.

Egypt, which has come under close scrutiny in recent years for its human rights record, was selected as a representative from Africa, joined by Angola, South Africa and Madagascar. Other representatives include India, Indonesia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Philippines, Qatar, Nicaragua, the Netherlands, Bolivia and Italy. All will start their three-year term on June 20.

This is the second year that the General Assembly has voted on member countries for the Council. Previously, terms were set at one year, but those selected in this round will serve for three.

Egypt received 168 votes, ranking second in Africa following Angola's 172 ballots. (HH)
—Newsreel is written by Yasmeen El Mallah, Marwa Helal, Ethar El-Kataney, Cache Seel and Hassan Hassan

ONLINE, all university applications as of the beginning of the next school year. Minister of Higher Education Hany Helal announced last month that Maktab El-Tanaseeq (the office placing students and processing applications to national universities) will become a virtual entity, and that all university applications will have to be filled in and processed online.

RANKED 19, Egypt among the world's biggest cigarette-consuming countries. According to a study published to coincide with International No Smoking Day last month, Egyptians smoke 19 billion cigarettes every year, at an annual cost of \$1.8 billion.

SENTENCED, Howayda Taha to six months in prison for tarnishing Egypt's image and harming national interest. The producer working with Qatar-based satellite TV station Al-Jazeera had been preparing a report on torture in Egyptian prisons in which she had subjects reenact scenes of police brutality when she was arrested several months ago. Taha was convicted in absentia by a state security court and fined LE 20,000. She is currently in Qatar. At press time Taha's defense team had appealed the verdict, with the next hearing scheduled for June 16.

DEAD, nine Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) peacekeepers after their plane crashed in the Sinai early last month. Casualties included French and Canadian soldiers who were on a training mission when their plane issued a distress signal before losing contact with air traffic control and crashing in a remote part of the mountainous Sinai desert. The MFO is an independent peacekeeping organization established by Egypt and Israel to monitor their border in Sinai after a 1979 peace accord. At press time MFO and French officials had begun investigating into the crash.



Far less than the average Egyptian's annual intake

AILING, 27 people in Tahta after being treated with infected saline solutions packed in Haydelena IV drips. The patients reportedly came down with symptoms at first thought to be from poisoning, all suffering from high fever and constant vomiting. Initial investigations identified the solution, which came from storage at Tahta Hospital, as the common factor among the patients. The incident added more fuel to the fire in the Haydelena infected blood-bags scandal for which MP Hany Sorour, Haydelena agent in Egypt, has come under fierce attack. At press time, 11 of the patients were reported in stable condition; the others remain under supervision.

RELEASED, five of the culprits implicated in the "loan deputies" scandal of the 1990s. Tawfik Abdo Ismail, former tourism minister and ex-director of the Daqahliyah Bank, Mahmoud Ghoneim, former manager of the Heliopolis branch of the bank, Ibrahim Aglan and Mohamed Fakhry, former deputy and board member at the bank, respectively, and businessman Mokhtar El-Ashry were freed before completing their 15-year sentences, after they coughed up a total LE 475 million plus interest to settle their debts with United Bank. et

CORRECTION

In the May 2007 edition of et, our review of the new MINI ("When Size Matters," page 117) contained a mistake regarding the models that will be available in Egypt. The models to be sold here include the MINI Cooper and MINI Cooper S. We regret the error.



