

The Honorable Marco Rubio
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Rubio,

We write to you as a long-time advocate for international religious freedom and a faithful champion to the voiceless in the Middle East and North Africa. Accordingly, we convey our deep concern regarding the Egyptian government's alarming escalations to confiscate the Greek Orthodox Monastery of Saint Catherine in Sinai, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the world's oldest continuously inhabited Christian Monastery. For over 1,500 years, Saint Catherine's has been self-governed by the Greek Orthodox Diocese of Sinai. Egypt's own 2002 UNESCO nomination explicitly affirmed this custodianship. Yet today, the monastery's autonomy is in jeopardy.

In 2014, the South Sinai Governorate and St. Catherine's Municipality— later joined by the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities— filed a case against the Monastery's archbishop asking for his eviction from parts of the land, state control over the site, and compensation for the monks' use of the land. In 2022, a court decided in favor of the Egyptian government's representatives, and last May, an appeals court in Ismailia effectively stripped the Monastery's archbishop of all land ownership rights of Saint Catherine's land, granting the monastic community usufruct rights over small parts of the site.

The Egyptian government had announced its plans to develop a tourist compound on the site despite strong international opposition. Still, reports confirm that authorities have bulldozed several areas, displaced about 4,000 members of the native Jebeleya tribe, forced inhabitants to exhume their graves, and built hotels in preserved grounds.

While the Egyptian government has repeatedly deflected these concerns with a vague promise of preserving the site's heritage, the current plan Cairo is pursuing would place icons, manuscripts, relics, and even the remains of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, under the control of the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities, without legal safeguards or international arbitration.

These actions are in direct contradiction with Egypt's commitments to UNESCO and threaten the integrity of the World Heritage system and any international efforts to protect cultural and religious property. Worse, allowing Egypt's nominee, former Antiquities Minister Khaled el-Anani, for UNESCO's Director-General elections next November to win risks the removal of the Monastery from the international community's attention. Allowing such precedents would open the door for governments worldwide to seize sacred sites from their rightful custodians and manipulate international organizations to rubber-stamp such illegal actions.

Therefore, we respectfully urge you to:

- Raise this issue directly with Cairo, pressing for respect of the Monastery's established status-quo, historic custodianship, and the sanctity of the entire monastic community's sites.
- Oppose the advancement of leadership candidates implicated in undermining World Heritage protections.

We ask that you prioritize the preservation and autonomy of this ancient Monastery in its regional agenda. This policy reflects your consistent reputation for upholding religious freedom and protecting mankind's most valuable treasures. Saint Catherine's Monastery is a gift for all humanity. It deserves protection, no expropriation.