

Coptic Christians Gunned Down After Christmas Service in Egypt

Despite threats of violence from Muslims in an area of Egypt wracked by sectarian violence, police declined to increase security for a Coptic Christmas Eve service on Jan. 6, and six Christians were shot to death after leaving the church.

Three men suspected to be Muslims, including one with a criminal record sought by police, were in a moving car from which automatic gunfire hit Coptic Christians who had attended services at St. John's Church in Nag Hammadi, 282 miles south of Cairo. A Muslim security guard was also killed, and nine other Coptic Christians were wounded, with three of them in critical condition, according to news reports.

Copts, along with many Orthodox communities, celebrate Christmas on Jan. 7.

The primary Muslim suspected of firing the automatic rifle at the Copts, witnesses reportedly told police, is local resident Mohammed Ahmed Hussein. Local clergy said Hussein had not been arrested for previous crimes because he receives protection from officials in the ruling National Democratic Party.

Hussein

reportedly fired while his car traveled some 400 meters. A provincial security official told The Associated Press that those killed were shot 200 meters from the church.

The church's

bishop told Agence France-Presse (AFP) that he had concluded the Christmas Eve mass an hour early, by 11 p.m., for security reasons.

The clergyman,

identified only as Bishop Kirilos, told AFP some of those in his congregation had received cell phone calls threatening that Muslims "will avenge the rape of the girl during the Christmas celebrations."

In November a

local 12-year-old Muslim girl was allegedly abducted and raped by a Coptic youth. In response to the alleged rape, hundreds of Muslim protestors torched Christian-owned shops in the town of Farshut, near Nag Hammadi.

After killing

those near the church in yesterday's attack, the bishop reportedly said, the gunmen continued shooting at Copts in other parts of the town. They reportedly fired at a convent, which also houses the bishop's offices, as they left town.

Thousands of Coptic Christian demonstrators

reportedly took to the streets in Nag Hammadi today to protest lack of

protection from Muslim violence. An estimated 5,000 Copts attended the funeral for the six Christians victims.

AFP reported that protestors stoned cars during the funeral, and in response police fired tear gas. Demonstrators reportedly chanted, "With our spirit and blood, we will sacrifice ourselves for the Cross."