

Enraged Muslims Raze Christian Homes in Egypt



Firefighters put out a fire at a church surrounded by angry Muslims in the Imbaba neighborhood in Cairo on May 7. (AP Photo)

Enraged Muslims burned down several Christian-owned homes, surrounded a church and threatened to kill a priest last week in two unrelated incidents in Upper Egypt.

On Saturday in Awlad Khalaf village, just outside Sohag, 240 miles (386 kilometers) south of Cairo, local Muslims attacked Coptic Christian Wahib Halim Atteyah, robbed him of 32,000 Saudi Riyals (\$8,530), and bulldozed his home along with the other structures on his property, according to local media. The group then raided six other Coptic-owned homes and burned them to the ground. Most of the stolen items were returned because of efforts of other Muslims in the area, according to Egyptian newspaper *Watani*.

Villagers had begun circulating a rumor that Atteyah was constructing a church building on his property. Atteyah was reportedly building a house but also built a barn and a livestock facility in violation of a permit that allowed him to build on 95 square meters of land.

Atteyah
and another Coptic Christian, Ihab Na'eem, were later
arrested. Reports
of the specific charges varied, but all said they had to do
with the
Christians allegedly repelling the attack with firearms, a
charge
Atteyah said was untrue. Two Muslims accused of setting houses
on fire
also have been arrested.

At least five Muslims and one Copt
were reportedly injured in the attack. Security forces have
been
deployed to protect the remaining Coptic homes in the area.

Efforts to reach Thabet and other members of the Minya
Diocese were unsuccessful, as were attempts to contact
Atteyah.

In a previous incident on Thursday in Beni-Ahmed al-Gharbiya
village near the town of Minya, 136 miles (220 kilometers)
south of
Cairo, a group of Salafi Muslims surrounded the Church of St.
George and
demanded that the parish priest, the Rev. Gorgy Thabet, leave
the
village or they would kill him and hold Muslim prayers in the
church
building. Salafis, who formed a hard-line Islamic movement
with extremist
tendencies, pattern their belief and practices on the first
three
generations of Muslims.

Security police kept the mob from
breaking into the church building, then removed the priest
from the

village. It was not known if there were any injuries in the incident.

Last week's problem at the St. George church had its roots in an incident that happened there more than two months prior. In March, groups of Muslims protested at the church site after learning the congregation had begun expanding a building on church property. After the Muslims forced the Christians into a "reconciliation meeting" by threatening to attack the church building, the expansion project was abandoned.

The group also demanded that Thabet leave. Church officials refused, but then removed the priest temporarily in an apparent attempt to appease Islamic extremists in the community.

Problems started afresh when the self-imposed banishment ended last week. In a press statement published in *Watani* newspaper, the office of the archbishop of Minya stated: "Crowds of hard-line Salafi Muslims, some of them carrying arms, have resumed their demonstration around the church of Mar-Girgis in the village of Beni-Ahmed al-Gharbiya, threatening to kill the priest, Father Gorgy Thabet, if he does not leave the village."

The statement added that the protestors in question had no right to make their demands.

“Serving the congregation is a question which concerns the church alone, and no person or movement outside the church has any right to interfere in it,” according to the statement.

The two attacks last week broke a relative calm that has existed in Egypt since late May, when a group of Muslims surrounded a church in Ain Shams, Cairo and prevented it from being reopened. The week before that, a group of Muslims attacked two church buildings in Cairo, setting one on fire.

At least 12 people were killed and more than 200 were wounded when members of the Salafi movement attacked two churches and surrounding Christian-owned homes and businesses in a poor section of Cairo on May 7. The Salafi Muslims set fire to one of the two church buildings, leaving most of it gutted.

The arson attack on the Virgin Mary Church in Imbaba was one of many recent assaults on Coptic Christians by members of the Salafist movement. The mob first attacked St. Mina Church in Imbaba on May 7 after a rumor spread that a Coptic woman who allegedly converted to Islam was being held in the church against her will. Clergy members of St. Mina allowed a group of Islamic imams into the church building to search for the

woman, and the
imams declared to the gathering Muslims that the woman wasn't
in the
building, according to witnesses at the scene.

After
unsuccessfully trying to push through the barricades, the mob
went to
the Virgin Mary Church, an undefended building a 10-minute
walk from St.
Mina. A few men were in the building when it was attacked. All
escaped
except for one, Salah Aziz, the church attendant. A group of
youths
trying to extinguish embers from the fire discovered his body
in a side
room of the sanctuary that was used a baptismal, said the Rev.
Mittias
Ilias, head priest of the Virgin Mary Church.

Salafis have
made a series of attacks and threats against Coptic Christians
since the
fall of the Hosni Mubarak regime on Feb. 11. The movement,
some Copts
said, is trying to incite violence between the Muslim majority
and the
Coptic minority, now estimated to be 7 to 10 percent of
Egypt's
population of 83 million.