

Muslim Mob in Egypt Firebombs Christian Homes, Businesses

Christians in a small village in southern Egypt are rebuilding their lives and homes after hundreds of Muslims rampaged through their community firebombing houses and businesses over rumors of a romantic relationship between a Christian and a Muslim.

At least 23 homes and numerous businesses, all Christian-owned, were damaged or destroyed in the village of Al-Nawahid in Qena Governorate, 454 kilometers (282 miles) south of Cairo. Five people were injured, two seriously.

The attack devastated the Christians of Al-Nawahid, said Badier Magdy Demetry, 22.

"It has affected us in every way, financially, physically, spiritually – everything," Demetry said. "My brother saw the house after it was burnt down, and he fainted. He couldn't believe what happened to the house. Everybody is living in sadness and desperation."

The attack started on the evening of Nov. 15 when a throng of hundreds of Muslims poured onto the streets chanting "God is great!" while brandishing swords, knives, meat cleavers and shooting rifles in the air,

according to
Ra'fat Samir, a human rights activist in Luxor.

The mob moved to four streets in the village where some 40 homes owned by Christians are huddled together. The Christians fled as the crowd approached.

"People started to run away from their houses, from the top of their roofs to the house next door, so they could escape with their wives and children," Demetry said. "Then they attacked us and set the houses on fire – more than 20 houses."

Others were too afraid to leave their homes when they heard the gunfire, rights activist Samir said.

"When they knew there was an attack, they all started to hide," he said.

Five people who couldn't run quickly enough were injured, according to Samir. Two 87-year-old men suffered head injuries, and the rest had injuries to their arms and shoulders, he said.

The mob pelted the homes and businesses with rocks and then looted them. They then torched the buildings with Molotov cocktails and bombs made out of propane tanks. Numerous shops were destroyed along with a grocery store and a business that sold animals to butchers. Also destroyed were farms and two water pumps worth more than US\$20,000 each. The pumps were vital for transporting water from the Nile to farms in the arid,

agricultural-based community.

"They stole as much as they could, and whatever they couldn't take, they burned," Demetry said. "There was screaming all over the village. We were screaming and asking God to help us. We have never seen a night like that before."

The rioters were responding to a rumor that a 20-year-old Coptic man, Hussam Naweil Attallah, was romantically involved with an 18-year-old Muslim woman, whose name has not been released. Attallah knew the woman because he and his family lived next door to her.

Someone had allegedly seen the two alone together near a cemetery. Attallah and the woman were detained and then handed over to police. After subjecting the young woman to a medical examination to confirm her virginity, authorities decided the two had not been intimate, and the woman was released. Egypt's State Security Intelligence kept Attallah in its custody, presumably for his protection. He is still in custody.

It is unclear who started a rumor about an illicit relationship, but Samir said there is a feud going on in Al-Nawahid among three families for political control of the area, and two of the families are inciting violence, using Christians in the area as pawns to depose the current mayor.

Local police and area residents seemed to be aware unrest was coming before the riot happened, Samir said. Church officials canceled St.

George's Day

services in anticipation of violence. Security forces had been posted near the Christian area of Al-Nawahid for a few days, but for unknown reasons they moved away shortly before the destruction started.

When the rampage began at 8 p.m., at the start of *Eid al-Adha* – the Muslim Feast of the Sacrifice – local police were quickly outnumbered, and military police were called. At 10 p.m. the new security detail surrounded the area of the violent mob but did nothing to stop the attacks.

Security forces prevented firefighters deployed to the scene from entering the area where fires were burning, according to Samir. When fire-fighting teams eventually entered the area, Muslim groups had severed fire mains. The blazes raged for four hours.

Two rioters were detained, according to local media reports. The use of tear gas eventually broke up the mob.

After the rioting was over, Copts whose homes and property had been damaged were rounded up and taken to a police station. They declined to cooperate with the police, citing alleged irregularities in police reports and objections to how officers conducted the investigation into the fires.

Initially police claimed that the fires started suddenly and that area Muslims tried to help put them out. Samir said he thought the claim was dubious at best.

"The fires started at the same time in 23 houses?" he said.

Demetry was less diplomatic. "We saw them," he said. "We saw them, one by one, doing it."

According to Samir, police did not let the victims report the names of the people who attacked their homes or report damages. He also said police did not take any information about men who suffered physical injuries. The group of victims has obtained a lawyer to take both criminal and civil action against the attackers.

"As long as the police fail to make strong charges against these people, these problems will keep going for years," Samir said. "Because they try to hide the truth."

Meantime, victims like Demetry and his family are left to sift through the rubble and try to rebuild their lives. He said his brother is still trying to cope.

"His whole apartment was turned to ashes," Demetry said. "Even the plaster [from the walls] was on the ground. They even tried to break the ceramic floor and take it."

There are many similarities between this month's attack and an attack that happened in November 2009 in the village of Kom al-Ahmar, also in Qena Governorate. For several days, mobs swept through the village burning Christian-owned houses and businesses after a rumor started

that a Christian man, Girgis Baroumi Girgis, then 21, raped a Muslim girl, then 12. Samir said people often use rumors in Qena to incite violence against the Christian minority.

“When people want to make a problem, they make up a story that a Christian boy is in love with a Muslim girl or vice versa,” Samir said.

Numerous Coptic human rights activists and some journalists in Egypt have called the rape accusation into question. They cite the conflicting accounts from the alleged victim, physical evidence that seems to contradict an accusation of sexual assault and lack of witnesses to a crime that allegedly took place in broad daylight on a major thoroughfare of the village.

Girgis has been in jail without any serious attempt to bring him to trial – another sign, interested parties said, that the evidence against him is weak.

Things are now quiet in Al-Nawahid, but it is an uneasy peace.

“Everyone is still afraid. Even the people in the village next door are afraid,” Demetry said, “We can’t trust anyone.”