

‘They Attacked God Himself’: A Message on Behalf of Seven Christians Murdered in Libya

It was late Sunday evening, Feb. 23, when Nashat Bibawi was awakened by a pounding on the door of the apartment he shared with his father and two brothers-in-law in Benghazi, Libya. When his father, Talaat Sedeek Bibawi, opened the door, three men dressed in military-style fatigues and carrying automatic weapons burst into the room.

In Libya, armed gangs and lawlessness have become increasingly common in the two years since the removal of Muammar Gaddafi. The interim government has not been able to implement a stable political solution, nor has it been able to control the Islamic militant groups that have been active throughout the country.

“Libya, in particular, is now a failing nation with a very weak government and the jihadist gangs in control of the street,” Hal Meawad, spokesman for Coptic Solidarity, told International Christian Concern (ICC).

There are multiple groups active in the country, but those operating under the label Ansar al-Sharia (Partisans of Islamic Law) have been implicated in a number of the most brutal attacks targeting both Christians and Westerners living in the country.

Vanished in the Night

There were three gunmen from Ansar al-Sharia now standing inside the second-floor apartment where Nashat was living with his father, Talaat, and brothers-in-law, Nadhi and Hani.

The four were living in a building occupied by some 200

Egyptian workers, mostly from Upper Egypt, who had taken jobs in the Libyan construction industry to send money home to their families. Of those 200, about 25 were Christians from a village in the Sohag province, and the majority of the others were Muslim, Nashat told ICC.

"They asked us if we were Christians," Nashat said. "We told them, 'Yes, we are Christians.'"

They checked the men's wrists, looking for the tattoo of the cross, common for most Coptic Christians. Then they proceeded to search the apartment, taking the men's cellphones, passports and whatever money they found.

They then forced the men out of the apartment and into the street.

"Outside the building, we found another five gunmen holding four Christian workers—they were our relatives who were living in a first-floor apartment—and two Jeeps waiting for us," Nashat recounted.

The events of the next few moments would spare Nashat's life, but this was also the last time he would see his father alive.

As the gunmen were beginning to load the eight men into the waiting Jeeps, a Libyan citizen who lives near the building came over and began to ask the Ansar al-Sharia gunmen why they were taking these Egyptians away.

The gunmen beat the man to convince him to leave without asking any more questions. In the midst of the commotion, Nashat saw an opening.

"I rushed back into the building and went to the roof and hid there," he told ICC. "I heard them enter the building looking for me, but they couldn't find me."

After a few minutes of searching, they loaded the seven, including Nashat's father and two brothers-in-law, into the

car and drove off.

Shaken up and fearing the gunmen might return, the remaining Christians left and spent the remainder of the night in another building.

On Monday morning, the news came out that the bodies of seven men had been discovered on a deserted beach outside the city. The men had been bound and shot in the head or chest, Nashat told ICC.

Christians Are a Marked Group

Unfortunately, the nightmare that Nashat lived through is not an isolated incident. Libya has become an increasingly hostile place, especially for Christians in the country.

“What was the mistake Edward did to be killed?” asked Amin Nashed Boulos, the brother of Edward Boulos, who was among the seven killed. “He left his family and traveled [to] Libya to work there and save money to meet the needs of his family. He was enduring the difficulties there to feed his family.”

The lack of economic opportunities in Upper Egypt is what drives many to find work in Libya, but the unstable conditions in the country have turned many of them into targets.

“The Christians who come here for work are always subjected to persecution from the Ansar al-Sharia groups,” Nashat told ICC.

On the walls near his apartment building, Nashat said they have written, “Those who guide us to a Christian will receive a reward of 10,000 Libyan Dinar [\$8,000 USD].”

“The situation of the Christians in Libya is so bad,” said Kemal Kaldas, a lawyer and a cousin of the victims, who spoke with ICC. “The Christians in Libya are targeted from the Partisans of Al Sharia groups who belong to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.”

"I ask the Egyptian government to intervene quickly and secure the rights of the victims, to ask the Libyan authorities to investigate and arrest the assailants," Kamal said.

A Hurting Community

"I lost two brothers," Farg Girgis Habib told ICC. One brother, Nadhi Girgis Habib, was 26, married and a father of two. The other, Hani Girgis Habib, was 24, married and a father of one.

"When Hani left for Libya, his wife was pregnant with their first son," Farg told ICC. "He was planning to come home next month to meet him for the first time. He never saw his son."

"The death of my two brothers was a shock for all my family," he said. "It was a terrible thing. The other victims are my relatives too. I know that they are martyrs and in heaven with Jesus Christ. They were killed because they are Christians, because of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ."

The Christian community in Sohag, where all seven victims were from, is shaken by this attack. Wives and children are now trying to move on without husbands and fathers.

Those in Libya are also shaken by the brutality of the killings.

"The killing of the Egyptian Christians in Benghazi caused us terrible pain and suffering," a church leader in Libya, who asked to remain anonymous, told ICC. "Thinking of those poor young men who just came here to earn their living and died miserably on a desert beach, alone, without any kind of compassion, just because they believed in Jesus Christ, makes me sick and sad."

"Those who struck them attacked God himself, and it is to Him they will answer for their actions," he shared in a message delivered to his church on March 2.

The violence has shown no signs of slowing as reports continue to come in of more Christians being targeted for new attacks. In the midst of such a tragic situation, it must be to God that we turn.

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