

20 Beheaded Martyrs Finally Laid to Rest

Tears mixed with joy on Tuesday as the remains of 20 Christians were laid to rest in Egypt's Minya province more than three years after they were kidnapped and beheaded in Libya in an attack that provoked rare Egyptian air strikes.

The return of the bodies of 20 Egyptian Copts has brought families in rural Egypt a chance for some closure after years in mourning with little hope of having the bodies of their loved ones being recovered for burial.

"Everyone stood beside the martyr that belongs to him and cried a little, but they were tears of longing, nothing more," said Bishri Ibrahim, father of Kerolos, one of the victims, at the funeral service at a church in the village of al-Our in Minya province, where they were all laid to rest.

"But we are happy and joyful that they have returned to the village. This is a blessing for the country and to all Copts all over the world," he added.

Thirteen of the 21 Libya victims came from al-Our, a rural town of around 10,000 people south of Cairo.

President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi ordered the Church, named The Church of the Martyrs of Faith and Homeland, to be built soon after the incident and dedicated in their memory.

Sisi also ordered a wave of air strikes on the Islamic State's militant bases in Libya.

The remains of the victims, who were flown from Libya about a private jet to Cairo on Monday night, were placed inside cylinder-shaped containers covered in velvet cloth with the names of each victim and interred under the church altar.

Families said the burial place would be opened as a shrine for visitors.

The victims had been among the many poor Egyptians who risked their lives to find work in the lawless chaos of Libya following the downfall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 and civil war.

A video posted by Islamic State in January 2015 showed 21 people—20 Egyptian Copts and one Ghanaian Christian—lined up on a Libyan beach in orange jumpsuits before they were executed.

“I wanted to see Milad come back from Libya on his feet after his struggle and hard work to earn a living in a harsh life abroad,” 55-year-old Zaki Hanna, the father of one of the victims.

“But thanks be to God, he died a hero, did not beg anyone to spare his life and he and his brothers, the martyrs, did not abandon their faith or homeland.”

Bashir Estephanos, whose two younger brothers were killed by Islamic State in Libya, said all Christians in al-Our village had been praying for the past three years for the bodies of the “martyrs” to be found.

Libyan authorities recovered the bodies in October after the area where they were buried was recaptured from the militant Islamist group.

“Our prayers were answered, so thanks be to God from the bottom of our hearts,” he said, speaking before the bodies arrived in the village.

The head of the Coptic Church in Egypt, Pope Tawadros II, was at the airport to receive the remains when they arrived in Cairo on Monday night. {eo}