

Another Copt Killed as Alleged Shooters Plead Not Guilty in Egypt

✖ Three men accused of killing six Coptic worshipers and a security guard pleaded not guilty on Saturday as the Coptic community mourned the loss of yet another victim of apparent anti-Christian violence.

The three men allegedly sprayed a crowd with gunfire after a Christmas service in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, on Jan. 6. In addition to the seven that were killed, nine others were wounded. The killings were the worst act of anti-Coptic violence since January 2000, when 20 Copts were killed in sectarian fighting in Al-Kosheh.

Defendants Mohammed al-Kammuni, Qorshi Abul Haggag and Hendawi Sayyed appeared Saturday in an emergency security court in Qena, a city 39 miles north of Luxor.

In front of the packed courtroom, the three men said little at the hearing other than to enter their plea before Judge Mohammed Adul Magd, according to one attorney present at the hearing. The men are charged with premeditated murder, public endangerment and damaging property.

Numerous Muslim attorneys volunteered to defend them for free as seven attorneys representing the interests of the victims looked on. The next hearing is set for March 20.

Even as the men entered their pleas, the Coptic community mourned the loss of yet another Christian, this one shot dead by police. On the evening of Feb. 9, Malak Saad, a 25-year-old Coptic carpenter living in Teta in Menoufia Province, was walking outside a meeting hall that police had seized from Christians when he was shot through his chest at close range.

He died instantly.

Scant details are known about the shooting. Police surrounded the entire village and closed it to all reporters. In a statement, officials at the Interior Ministry said the Saad was killed by mistake when a bullet discharged while a police guard was cleaning his weapon. The Interior Ministry said the shooter has been detained and will be tried in a military court. Such courts are traditionally closed to the public.

One of Saad's cousins, who requested anonymity, disputed the Interior Ministry's version of the incident. He said that the guard had used the bathroom inside the meeting hall and had come outside of the building when he exchanged a few words with Saad and shot him at close range. The bullet went completely through Saad's chest.

The building in question had been Coptic-owned for 16 years, but two days prior to the shooting, police seized it after a group of Muslims started a rumor that the owners planned to convert the hall into a church building.

Disputes over worship venues are common in Egypt. Copts and other Christians are extremely restricted in opening or even maintaining houses of worship because of complex government statutes. Anti-Christian elements within Egyptian society often use the statutes to harass Christians, Christian leaders said.

Christians Arrested

Following the Jan. 6 shootings, in a move that Christian leaders said was designed to silence the Coptic community's protests, police began going door to door and arresting Coptic men in their late teens and 20s. Reports vary widely on the numbers of how many men were arrested, but 15 arrests have been confirmed.

Early in the morning of Jan. 8, officers from State Security

Intelligence appeared at the home of Tanios Samuel looking for a different house. When officers realized they were at the wrong home, they arrested his brothers, Fady Milad Samuel, 21, and Wael Milad Samuel, 24.

"We are Copts. It is their country, they will do whatever they want," Tanios Samuel said about the arrests.

He said the government is using his brothers and the others arrested as pawns to silence dissent. He said he lives in fear for himself and his brothers.

"The families are very scared – scared of violence, getting threats all the time," Samuel said. "All we want is peace."

Last month's attack brought widespread outrage across the Coptic community and from human rights groups around the world.

Since his rise to power in 1981, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has avoided classifying any anti-Coptic attack as part of a larger sectarian struggle within the country. His critics however, have long said his policies or lack thereof contribute greatly to the anti-Christian climate within the country.

Although freedom of religion is guaranteed in Egypt's constitution, Islam is the official state religion. In public schools, the Quran is used to teach Arabic.

On Jan. 21, Mubarak made an uncharacteristically strong statement about the shootings to MENA, the government-run news agency.

"The criminal act in Nag Hammadi has bled the hearts of Egyptians," he said. "I hasten to affirm that the reasonable people of this nation, and its religious leaders and thinkers ... bear the greater responsibility to contain discord and ignorance and blind fanaticism and to confront the despicable

sectarian strife that threatens the unity of our society.”

Despite Mubarak's comments, the government has characterized the attack as either a random criminal act or as one done in reaction to a November incident in which a 21-year-old Christian man allegedly raped a 12-year-old Muslim girl.

In an interview with BBC Arabic, Dr. Fathi Sourour, head of the Egyptian Parliament, said, “The Nag Hammadi shooting of Christians on Christmas Eve was a single criminal act, with no sectarian dimensions.” He added that the crime was “prompted by the ‘death’ of a Muslim girl as a result of being raped by a Copt.”

Later, commenting on a report about the incident, he described the shootings as “a clash between two brothers living in one home.”

Copts, however, have a starkly different impression of the shooting.

Georgette Qillini, a Coptic member of the Egyptian Parliament, described the attack as “a purely sectarian crime and by no means an individual criminal attack,” the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* reported.

Ibtessam Habib, another Coptic Parliament member, agreed that “sectarian rather than personal motives lie behind the Nag Hammadi attack.”