

Burned Church Is Latest in String of Tanzanian Attacks

Arsonists burned a Tanzania church Feb. 19 in the semi-autonomous region of Zanzibar, two days after gunmen killed a Catholic priest there.

The Evangelical Church of Siloam was set afire early Feb. 19 by an as-yet-unidentified group of people, police spokesman Mohamed Mhina said. No one was hurt and the fire was extinguished, he said.

The church, located in the city of Kianga on the island of Zanzibar, was under construction following a previous attack in January 2012.

Two days earlier, on Sunday, a Catholic priest was killed by armed men in the Motni area, in the urban west end of the island.

Father Evaristus Mushi was on his way to lead a service at the Betras Catholic Church on Feb. 17 when two armed men on a motorcycle shot him in the head, Bishop Methodius Kilaini told World Watch Monitor.

Mushi was rushed to a nearby hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

“Tanzania is a peaceful country, but a small group of extremists with outside influence want to spoil it,” Kilaini said.

According to police, three people were held for questioning in connection with the murder. They have not specified a motive.

The incidents are the latest in a string of attacks church leaders and Christian property across the country.

On Feb. 2, on mainland Tanzania, an Assemblies of God minister, Pastor Mathayo Kachili, was hacked to death in the Geita region, on the southern shores of Lake Victoria, when he intervened in an altercation between villagers over the slaughter of an animal.

In a bow to Islamic tradition, the local government had granted Muslims alone the right to act as butchers. Recently however, Christians in Geita district have entered the butcher trade.

Violence erupted after a non-Muslim butcher prepared meat to be served at a funeral. Protestors took out their anger on the Assemblies of God church, killing the pastor.

On Christmas Day, unidentified gunmen shot and seriously wounded a Catholic priest, Ambrose Mkenda, in the Tomondo area of Zanzibar Island.

Tanzania as a whole is 60 percent Christian and 36 percent Muslim. But on Zanzibar, more than 97 percent of residents are Muslim. In recent months, violence against the tiny Christian minority has been increasing.

The rise of violence has social and economic motivations, said Dismass Lyassa, a Social Editor at the Mwananchi Newspaper in Tanzania.

"Poor Muslim coastal areas in Kenya and Tanzania have proved fertile recruitment ground for Somalia's al Shabaab militants," Lyassa said.

Some Muslims, Lyassa said, point to the widespread closure of government offices on Sundays as evidence that Christians have forced their religion on the country. For Muslims, Friday is the traditional day of prayer.

The threat of terrorist violence in Zanzibar has grown in recent years with the rise of a group called the Association

for Islamic Mobilization and Propagation, also known as Uamsho, a Swahili word meaning “awakening.”

Though founded in 2001 as a charitable organization, Uamsho has evolved to become a strong critic of the perceived excesses of tourists on the archipelago, as well as an advocate for Zanzibar secession.

More regionally, East Africans have taken part in al-Qaida attacks, notably the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and a suicide-bomb attack on a hotel near Mombasa in 2002.

In the Zanzibar region, violent clashes erupted in the Mbagala suburb of Dar es Salaam in October, when scores of Muslim youth stormed a police station and demanded that a 14-year-old boy accused of urinating on the Quran be handed over to them.

In the aftermath of the confrontation, at least five churches were attacked, several cars smashed and passersby injured as the angry mob moved from street to street in the Mbagala Kizuiani area of the city.

Protesters broke down the door of the Catholic Church at Mbagala Zakhem, and torched The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania in the same area.

Police later confirmed attacks on the Seventh-Day Adventist, Tanzania Assemblies of God (TAG), Moravian, Anglican, and two other Catholic churches.