

Credible Terrorist Threats Have Pastors Cancelling Summer Services

The churches of Egypt are temporarily shutting down their summer activities.

“I asked all our churches and conference centers to cancel their trips and events for the next three weeks,” Dr. Andrea Zaki, president of the Protestant Churches of Egypt, told World Watch Monitor. “There is news they could be targeted by radicals.”

An unofficial translation of his official statement reads: “Warm greetings in the name of Jesus. In light of recent developments, please stop all church trips and conferences ... for July 2017. This is a serious matter. Any trip or conference [that continues] will be the personal responsibility of the organizer.”

Zaki confirmed the information came directly from the security agencies. Fr. Boules Halim, official spokesman for the Coptic Orthodox Church, told World Watch Monitor his denomination issued similar instructions, asking churches to wait for further information once the three-week moratorium expires.

The announcement comes six weeks after an Ascension Day church trip to the St. Samuel Monastery in Minya was ambushed by the Islamic State group on May 26. Thirty Copts were killed in the attack, including women and children.

A recent uptick in targeted violence has left five Copts murdered mysteriously in the past six weeks, as reported by World Watch Monitor.

Hundreds of Copts fled their homes in Sinai in March, warned

by IS via flyers amid individual killings.

Labelled “our favorite prey” by IS, dozens more were killed in suicide bombings in Tanta and Alexandria on Palm Sunday and in Cairo just before Christmas.

There is no estimate for the scope of activity affected by the order, but church trips and conferences for all ages represent a popular summer activity for Christians and one many, especially children, eagerly anticipate all year.

It may also further damage the Copts’ internal economy.

The historic Lillian Trasher Orphanage in Asyut, 200 miles south of Cairo, stated that many donations come from regularly-welcomed church outings to its facility. The orphanage can receive over 15 visits per month, a spokesman said.

The orphanage staff were also forced to cancel an overnight outing organized for their own high-school boys and girls, a fun opportunity for the orphans.

But the order will hardly affect the Apostolic Church of Ismailia in the Suez Canal region, said its pastor, Saeed Awad. He has refrained from organizing church trips to religious sites for the past three years, though he said it is safe inside Ismailia and to the west.

“We are on the front lines,” he said of his city bordering the Sinai, 70 miles east of Cairo. “We are the first city ISIS would come to.”

Yet despite the threats, Coptic Orthodox Bishop Thomas plans to keep open his popular Anafora retreat center—for individuals, not groups.

“Being careful is important, and security measures are necessary,” he said. “But it is vital we don’t spread fear among the people.”

Fearful or not, the churches are taking the issue seriously.

“We are all cooperating for the safety of our country and our people,” Zaki said. “That is all.” {eo}

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