

Egypt's Christian Community Suffers as Muslims Lash Out

In the volatile environment that has gripped Egypt over the past month, it takes very little to trigger an outbreak of violence. A simple argument over a song in a cafe in Upper Egypt was all the spark needed to set off an explosion of Christian persecution and sectarian violence.

The clashes in the village of Eastern Bani Ahmed, in the Minya region, started just before sundown on Saturday, Aug. 3. By the time the smoke cleared, more than 15 were wounded, seven houses torched, nine cars set on fire, two churches assaulted and dozens of shops broken into and looted. The Diocese of Minya and Abu Qurqas valued the damage at nearly 5 million Egyptian pounds (\$714,000 USD), according to an International Christian Concern (ICC) contact in Egypt.

Since the removal of Islamist President Mohammed Morsi on July 3, Egyptian Christians have been the victims of a string of attacks all across the country. On Wednesday, Egyptian security forces attempted to put an end to pro-Morsi demonstrations that have lasted for weeks in the Egyptian capital. The intervention, which turned deadly, triggered another wave of attacks on churches and Christian-owned property across the country.

Tension Escalates

The violence in Eastern Bani Ahmed started on Saturday evening, Aug. 3, in a cafe just before sundown. A song praising the army came on the television. When the owner of the cafe began to turn the song off, a Christian man sitting in the cafe asked him to leave it on.

A shouting match began between the Christian man, the owner and some of the other customers. Some of the residents of the

village were able to step in and put an end to the disagreement. The peace would be short-lived, however.

After *iftar* (the meal ending the daily Islamic fast during the month of Ramadan), clashes began again between some Muslims and Christians in Eastern Bani Ahmed. Others came from nearby villages.

“The number of them reached to more than 4,000 people,” ICC’s contact in Egypt reports. “There were some Molotov cocktails and weapons, and they were chanting slogans against the Christians, the armed forces and the police.”

As soon as the crowds started to gather, security forces were called to the area. They arrived outside the village but did not intervene for at least two hours. The mob even attacked the security forces, and at least seven members of the security forces were injured in the incident, according to *Daily News Egypt*.

Security forces finally entered the village around 11:30 p.m. and were able to end the violence for a short while. However, once the security forces left, the attacks started again.

Widespread Destruction

The violence in Eastern Bani Ahmed caused massive amounts of damage to the Christian community. The Watani news outlet reports that in the end, the attacks “afflicted 37 Coptic families, and left in its wake seven houses, 24 shops, and nine vehicles—all Coptic-owned—ruined and burnt.”

ICC spoke with Atta Kemal, a 36-year-old curtain store owner whose entire store was demolished. The mob broke in after 2 a.m. Sunday morning while the shop was closed.

They “ransacked all the shop contents, two sewing machines and all the curtains. After that, they burnt it,” Kemal told ICC.

The homes of Christians were not spared either. Magdy Youssef shares a three-story home with his two brothers. When they

heard about the violence, they attempted to bar the door to secure their house before the mob arrived.

First, the mob broke into the hardware store on the first floor and looted it. Then, Youssef says, the mob “was able to break the main door of our home and broke into it. [They] threw Molotov cocktails inside our home and threw stones.”

Youssef suffered wounds on his head and leg, while his brother sustained head injuries. Youssef, his wife and children, and his two brothers and their families were able to escape through the rear gate of their home. They left their home to the mob who looted it.

Disturbing Trend

Sectarian tension, particularly persecution of the Coptic Christian community, has been on the rise since the ousting of Morsi. His Muslim Brotherhood supporters have taken aim at the Coptic Christian community in particular.

“The Islamists have issued several death threats against Pope Tawadros II,” Hal Meawad, spokesman for Coptic Solidarity, told ICC.

“The Muslim Brotherhood and their allies are blaming the Egyptian Christians for all of their troubles and for the ousting of Morsi. They are threatening of revenge soon,” Meawad continued, in an interview with ICC days before the attack in Eastern Bani Ahmed.

The government and security forces have not taken necessary measures to intervene and prevent the violence. The result is that incidents like that in Eastern Bani Ahmed continue to take place.

A group of 16 organizations led by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) say in a press release, “In the eastern town of Beni Ahmed ... the state institutions and security forces have clearly refrained from intervening to put an end

to sectarian tensions which have been on the rise for a full month between the town's residents, who are mostly Christians, and supporters of ousted president Mohammed Morsi from the surrounding villages.

"This negligence led to residents from these villages surrounding and attacking Beni Ahmed [sic] on Aug. 3."

Security forces arrested nearly a dozen individuals for their roles in the attacks in Bani Ahmed, according to Ahram. Several political and rights groups, including the Maspero Youth Union, have called for the state to do a better job of protecting all Egyptians.

Leaders from all aspects of civil society must join together in order to create a safer Egypt. They must commit to develop an inclusive Egypt, one that promotes the rights and freedoms of all its citizens, no matter their religion.

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