

Gutted Church Building Leaves Egyptian Copts With Debt

A hasty, inadequate renovation of a church building that Salafi Muslims largely gutted a year ago has left the congregation with staggering debt from additional repairs, church members said.

Waiting inside the main hall of the Virgin Mary Church in Imbaba, Cairo on June 10, a woman looked at the woodwork and religious artwork around her.

“The church looked much nicer before it was burned,” she said.

On May 7, 2011, at least 12 people were killed and more than 200 were wounded when members of the conservative **Islamic movement** attacked at least two churches and surrounding Christian-owned homes and businesses in a poor section of Cairo.

Salafis, a hard-line Islamic movement with extremist tendencies rioted, then set fire to the Virgin Mary building of the Coptic Orthodox Church after a rumor spread that a Coptic woman who had allegedly converted to Islam was being held inside the building against her will.

Army and police forces did little to stop the attacks, arriving at the scene two hours after they ceased. Fire crews spent four hours trying to extinguish the blaze. A church attendant, Salah Aziz, died in a room used in part for baptismal services.

No one has been charged for the fire or Aziz’s death.

In the weeks after the fire, the governorate of Cairo pledged to pay for the entire cost of the repairs.

“The city governorate said that they had funds of 6.5 million

[Egyptian] pounds [US\$ million] for renovating the church building,” said Alfons Ghatas, a deacon at the church. “With this amount, they could have demolished the whole building and rebuilt again, and it would have cost less than that.”

Ghatas said the construction company the government hired, Arab Contractors, worked around the clock on the project. As early as two days after the fire, workers from the company were at the site surveying the fire damage. But their materials and workmanship were inferior, Ghatas said.

“They had a timetable, and they were working twenty-four/seven, but the kind of work was what we call quantity, not quality,” he said.

Much of the original woodwork in the church building was replaced with inferior, veneer covered, pressed plywood. Some structural and decorative elements were not rebuilt, including a florescent cross on top of the church building that could be seen across Imbaba.

“After they finished, we started to look through the work they had done, and it was just covering up what was destroyed instead of completely changing it and doing it in a way it should have been done to last for a long time,” Ghatas said.

The additional repairs, which had to be done quickly, became expensive for the congregation, Ghatas said.

“We decided to ask for donations, and we did collect a lot, and we redid a lot of the work all over again, but that wasn’t enough, and this is why the church still owes the good contractors money,” he said.

The Rev. Sarabamoun Abdo, elder priest of the church, said that the congregation still owes 350,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$57,760) to the second set of contractors for the additional renovations.

Five days after the fire, as fine ash particles still hovered in the air, members of the church gathered to observe the Coptic liturgy. The liturgy was an act of obedience to God, but also of defiance to the men who attacked the church building.

“If you saw the crowds of people in the service just after the attack on the church, and how that strengthened people’s faith... As the Bible says, ‘The gates of hell will not prevail against you,’” Abdo said.