

Islamists in Egypt Use Rumors to Attack Christians

Tensions remain high in an Egyptian village where as many as 5,000 mostly Salafi Muslims went on a rampage over a false rumor that a church was holding a girl against her will in order to convert her back to **Christianity**.

Dismissing media reports of 20,000 rioting Muslims, sources told Compass that between 2,000 and 5,000 hard-line Muslims, most of them from the **Salafi movement**, last month harassed Christian villagers in Meet Bahsar in the Nile Delta, attacked a church building in a misguided effort to “save” the girl, damaged a priest’s house and then destroyed his car.

The 14-year-old girl’s father, an ethnic Copt who converted to Islam, had stirred them up on the mistaken notions that his daughter had converted to Islam and that Christians had kidnapped her, the church priest told Compass.

“Things are partly calmer now, and parishioners still go to church but they are a bit hesitant,” said the Rev. Gerges Gamil of the Church of the Virgin Mary. “Some things got broken in my house, because they threw rocks and stones at the house, and my car was destroyed, but thankfully no one in my family was hurt.”

The girl, 14, was not in the church building. It was unclear if her father was merely mistaken about her location or intentionally misled villagers.

The attack mainly by Salafists, an extremist movement that patterns its belief and practices on the first three generations of Muslims, happened on the evening of Feb. 12. Skirmishes in Meet Bahsar lasted for two days, with Muslim villagers threatening to kidnap Coptic girls in retaliation for the alleged kidnapping.

Some media reported that the rioters knocked down a wall surrounding the church, but priests speaking on behalf of the parish said the wall was already being demolished.

The events that led to the attack involved a family dispute.

The girl's father, Khalil Ibrahim Mouhamed Abd Allah, converted to Islam in 2009, and then divorced his Christian wife and married a Muslim woman. Abd Allah claimed that his daughter converted to Islam in October of last year. In February, the girl got engaged to a Muslim man in her father's village, but shortly after the engagement she ran away.

"She got engaged to a Muslim man called Ahmed Abdallah, but she was still in touch with some Christians, and after the engagement she disappeared," Abd Allah told local media. "So, I immediately thought that the Christians kidnapped her."

By contrast, the girl reportedly said her father treated her poorly and that she never converted to Islam. She confirmed the engagement but said that ultimately she couldn't continue with it because the groom-to-be was Muslim.

The girl was able to make it to Cairo, but after finding out about the attacks and the reports that she was being held against her will, she contacted police. Her location was not publicly known at press time, but she has reportedly asked not to be returned to her father or mother.

Egyptian newspapers have reported that she was either in state care or the custody of an uncle. She reportedly said she went to Cairo to stay with an uncle.

The Salafi movement is made up of **extremely conservative Muslims** increasingly known for their vitriolic rhetoric and attacks against churches in Egypt. The Salafis have used rumors of kidnappings or relationships between Christians and Muslims to incite other attacks against Christians. In May, an attack in downtown Cairo left 12 people dead and at least one

church building in ruins.

More recently, in January Salafists terrorized Christians of a village in northern Egypt after an unsubstantiated rumor spread about a video recording of a Coptic man having sex with a Muslim woman. The Muslims in Sharbat, near Alexandria, rioted and then forced numerous Christians to abandon their property in informal but binding "reconciliation councils," though a parliamentary commission overturned the council decision last month, and most of the evicted Christian families have returned home.

Human rights activists say such councils are unjust and are often a guise to force members of the Coptic minority to relinquish their rights.