

Muslim Assailants in Egypt Escape Prosecution

A recent “reconciliation meeting” between members of a Muslim mob that attacked a Christian-owned school in Egypt and school administrators was nothing less than an attempt at legalized extortion, the director of the school said.

In exchange for peace, members of the sword-wielding mob that stormed the school last month without provocation—and held two nuns hostage for several hours—initially demanded in the meetings that the school sign over parcels of land that include the guesthouse the **Muslim extremists** attacked.

Magdy Melad, manager of the Notre Dame Language Schools in Aswan Province, told Compass that despite the risk of more attacks, he refused the assailants’ demand. Doing so, he said, would set a precedent in Aswan of Muslims attacking and seizing Christian-owned property and then using reconciliation councils to give the appearance of legitimacy.

“If we give in to that, they will take everything,” Melad said.

He conceded that although he escaped with the property, and the victims escaped with their lives, he may have given away something more precious; he agreed not to prosecute any of the hundreds of people who attacked his school.

“The only thing we had to give away was our rights,” Melad said sardonically, adding that the threat of future violence forced him to make the agreement. “This was all against the law.”

“Reconciliation meetings” are held throughout Egypt after incidents of “sectarian” violence in order to restore calm. Increasingly used during the administration of former Egyptian

President Hosni Mubarak, the meetings are loosely based on traditional Arabic tribal councils. Supporters of the reconciliation process, mainly government and Islamic leaders, say the meetings offer a way to defuse tensions. Those who oppose the process, including numerous human rights groups and Coptic rights activists, say the meetings are just a way to pressure powerless groups and people into giving away what little rights they have.

On March 4, about 1,500 villagers chanting Islamic slogans and brandishing swords and knives surrounded a guesthouse at the privately run, public language school in the village of Abu Al-Reesh. The mob accused nuns trapped inside of building a church in the guesthouse and threatened to burn them out unless they surrendered. The situation lasted for eight hours until police were finally able to bring the nuns to safety.

The women faced “unimaginable fear,” Melad said, adding, “No matter what I say, I cannot give a picture of the fear and the worry they had.”

During the attack, Muslims began shouting over loudspeakers from three nearby mosques, summoning more villagers to surround the guesthouse.

“People of Abu Al-Reesh, get down [there]—the Christians are **building a church** and building a monastery; the Christians took our ancestors’ land and are building a church,” the Muslim leaders demanded, according to Melad Kamel Garas, owner of the school.

The mob ransacked the building, stealing security cameras, electrical equipment and a satellite dish on top of the guesthouse, among other items, Melad confirmed.

The attack continued into the next day. According to Melad, at least one member of the mob told parents, “If you care for the safety of your sons, you will stop bringing them [to school].”

In the days that followed, one of the members of the mob hung a huge "closed" sign on the main school building. When a policeman told the villagers to take down the sign, they attacked him with knives, Melad said. The officer recovered after basic first-aid treatment.

"It's a very hard time in Egypt," Melad said.

The formal reconciliation meeting took place on March 25, with the local governor, members of the national intelligence service and representatives of the national police force in attendance, Melad said. People representing the group of villagers went in first and met with the governor for almost an hour. When they emerged, the governor assured Melad he would "never have any problems again."

Melad acknowledged that when the governor asked him to shake hands with one of the Muslims, he thought to himself, "*Shake hands for what?*"

The school still owns the guesthouse, but it has essentially been stripped bare—and government officials have ordered Melad not to use it. Ignoring the order could cost Melad more than a criminal charge, he said; it could cost him or one of his family members their life at the hands of a vindictive villager.

"Someone could stab you when you are walking down the street," he said.

Melad said that Abu Al-Reesh is peaceful now, "but you can't tell what's going on under the surface." Villagers are "distracted" by the political situation in the country, and Islamist groups have started quarreling with each other enough to care less about Christians in the community.

Attendance at the school is down by 30 percent, but Melad said it is hard to determine how much of the decline can be attributed to the attack. The school term is about to end, he

said, and many parents traditionally keep their children home to make sure they study for upcoming examinations. Also, it is a holiday season in Egypt.

He added, however, that, "Some parents are afraid it may happen again."

Two of the nuns are back at school, albeit in a reduced role. They only teach religious classes to Christian children. One of the nuns, however, could not come back to the school; she remains in Cairo, still suffering from the effects of a nervous breakdown caused by the attack.

As for how the children are faring, Melad said they have been resilient.

"They're kids—they fight with each other, and 10 minutes later they are playing again," he said.