

Nuns Traumatized After School Attack in Egypt

Two nuns in Upper Egypt faced “unimaginable fear”—with one later hospitalized over the emotional trauma—when 1,500 Muslim villagers brandishing swords and knives trapped them inside a guesthouse last week and threatened to burn them out.

The next day, the assailants frightened children at the school; attendance has since dropped by more than a third.

Accusing the nuns of building a church at the site, the throng on March 4 chanted Islamic slogans as they surrounded the guesthouse of a privately run public school in the village of Abu Al-Reesh, in Aswan Province. Two nuns, volunteer teachers at Notre Dame Language Schools, barricaded themselves into the school’s guesthouse for about eight hours.

The women were “terrified,” said Magdy Melad, director of the school.

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

School workers hid a third nun from the mob in a separate building on the campus out of fear that the mob would attack her as well. While two of the three nuns are Egyptian, one with a French name holds both Egyptian and French passports.

Conservative Muslims began milling around the school and accosting school employees at 2 p.m. on March 4. A group of men with swords stopped one employee and accused him of “building a church, and we are coming to attack the place,” the employee told Melad, who was at the scene of the attack.

“Huge numbers of people with swords, knives and daggers were gathering,” Melad said. “All that was in my head was that I

was worried about the nuns. So I called and told them not to open the door and not to move until I came to get them.”

The Muslims tried to push their way into the building as the nuns kept calling for help. The door to the guesthouse is made of heavy reinforced metal, according to Melad, which prevented the building from being breached. Members of the mob ransacked the entire building, stealing security cameras, electrical equipment and a satellite dish on top of the guesthouse, among other items.

From three mosques near the school, people began shouting over loudspeakers in minarets, summoning more Muslims to surround the guesthouse.

“People of Abu Al-Reesh, get down [there]—the Christians are building a church and building a monastery,” the loudspeakers blared, according to Melad Kamel Garas, owner of the school. “The Christians took our ancestor’s land and are building a church.”

School workers tried to get the nuns out of the building, but the Muslims sent them away.

“When we tried to get them out, they refused to let them out, and they wanted to burn them alive in the guesthouse,” Garas said.

School employees called police, but initially only three officers showed up, according to Melad. The mob set upon them. Four more trucks arrived with reinforcements, but authorities were still unable to control the mob.

Eventually, school workers began talking with moderate Muslims and were able, along with the police contingent, to get all of the nuns out. As the women were pulled through the crowd, different men began shouting that they were “pigs” and “infidels” who wanted to “build a church,” according to Garas.

The two nuns suffered cuts and bruises in the attack, and one fainted during the ordeal, according to Garas. The women were taken to a Catholic church in Aswan, except for one, who suffered what Melad characterized as a “major” nervous breakdown and had to be transported on March 8 to Cairo, where she was hospitalized.

The three nuns, who range in age from 30s to mid-50s, were part of a volunteer contingent brought to the school to teach manners to younger students. The nuns have been there for a year and are certified teachers. They did not teach religious classes other than to Christian students; school officials inspected all of their coursework and materials, and their texts were approved by the national Ministry of Education, Melad said.

“They are committed to teach what the Ministry of Education has told them to teach,” Melad said.

The next day, the mob started intermittently attacking the school itself.

“They scared the children in a very, very bad way,” Melad said. “The children were so scared, terrified.”

Notre Dame Language Schools enrolls about 560 students ranging from preschoolers to ninth graders. It is open to students from all faiths; roughly 360 of the students are Muslim, the rest being members of the Coptic minority. Having opened two years ago, the school has about 170 employees, 60 of them Coptic Christians and the rest Muslims.

After the nuns were removed from the guesthouse, members of the mob refused to let anyone inside, even after police inspected the building’s interior and found no place of worship.

Leaders of the mob told school officials that they were not allowed to use the guesthouse. They also said the school could

no longer continue doing construction work around the guesthouse.

Eventually the Muslims left the school property, and police posted a guard outside the building. But now the **Islamists** have enlisted a group of children who mill around the guesthouse and tell them if anyone goes inside, according to Melad.

This poses a problem because the guesthouse is also the utility control room for the school; all electrical switches, and the valves for the school water supply, are located there. School workers find themselves in the strange position of having to ask people from the mob to use school property. Police, Garas said, have done nothing to regain control of the guesthouse.

As a result, attendance at the school has dropped by 34 percent, something Garas said he understands.

"All the loss in property, that can be replaced," Garas said. "But all I am worried about is I don't want to lose one of the children. Because God forbid, if in an irrational act like this, one of the children got injured or hurt, all the money in the world wouldn't be able to fix or replace that."

An attempt is underway to force school officials into a "reconciliation meeting," which in Egypt usually results in Christians having to accept concessions with nothing in return. In September another group of Muslims in Aswan rioted outside another guesthouse, wrongly claiming that church officials were building a house of worship inside. In a reconciliation meeting, church officials agreed to remove the crosses outside the building and not to ring any church bells.

This wasn't enough, and eventually Salafis and other hardline Muslim villagers began rioting again. Ultimately church officials entered another series of reconciliation meetings. Altogether, the priests conceded to every major demand the

Muslim villagers made but received no conciliatory offers in return. While the domes on top of the church building were being removed in accordance with the meetings, the villagers attacked and burned it to the ground.

The priest of the church was later charged with a building violation and sentenced to six months in jail. None of the Muslims who attacked the church building have been charged. The priest will appeal the sentence.

Reconciliation meetings are, in theory, arbitration meetings between two equal entities that are loosely based on traditional tribal councils. But most human rights activists in Egypt say that the reconciliation process works to deny rights to powerless groups while maintaining an image of legality and fairness.

All in all, Garas said, the persecution in Aswan echoes what seems to be an unofficial motto there, "No Christians allowed."