

Offended Muslims Destroy Churches, Assault Christians

Across much of the Muslim world, more than two weeks of backlash to the Internet video *Innocence of the Muslims* has occasionally been directed at Christians, from computer hacks to church burnings.

It can be difficult to sort deliberate acts of persecution from simple undirected anger sparked by the video, which portrays Muhammad as a womanizer and false prophet. And, as anger over the video reverberates from Africa to Asia, it can be difficult to distinguish between video-inspired backlash against Christians, and the longer-running pattern of pressure targeted at Christians that has existed long before the film clip hit YouTube.

On Sept. 16, five days after Libyan rioters in Benghazi killed the U.S. ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans, a band of gunmen in the Nigerian city of Bauchi shot dead six Christian men playing cards. Though the killings were carried out at the same time demonstrators were marching in cities across the region to protest the video, the Bauchi state governor said the killings were not religiously motivated. Instead, authorities said they were part of a deadly weekend of violence in that part of Nigeria at the hands of Boko Haram, a radical Islamic sect that has carried out attacks in a similar manner in the past.

There was little doubt, however, two days earlier in the Niger town of Zinder as about 1,000 Muslims emerged from the Friday Jumu'ah prayers, divided into groups of several hundred each, and started marching toward the churches in town. They set the Winners Chapel afire. They severely vandalized the Union of Evangelical and Protestant churches' community center, the

Church of the Assemblies of God, and a Catholic church.

Several Christians were injured, though the exact number has not been verified. After police regained control at the churches, smaller groups damaged the homes of the evangelical church pastor and homes of members of the Catholic church. Police made numerous arrests.

Meanwhile, as far away as Pakistan, Christians anticipated the wave of Muslim anger to wash into their country.

“The day the Libyans killed an American we knew this would not stay far for long,” said a teacher in the northwest part of Pakistan, referring to the Sept. 11 Benghazi attack. By Sunday the 16th, rumors abounded that Christians in Pakistan were under attack.

“We were so on edge we panicked,” said the teacher, whose name is being withheld to protect her from retribution. “Even when it became evident this was a false alarm, we knew it could still happen.”

It did.

The following Friday, the 21st, an angry mob torched St. Paul Lutheran Church in Pakistan’s Mardan district. Protestors destroyed not only the church building but a school attended by Christian and Muslim children.

“Nothing is left,” a St. Paul pastor said, sitting on a pile of rubble, turning a brick over in his hand. “Pray for the healing of our hearts and hopes, that we may be the real church in this place and be like the Prince of Peace. I do not know if I have the energy for that.”

In same week of the Benghazi attack, a church in next-door Algeria reported receiving threats because of the video.

Police were alerted and no harm came to the church.

In Iraq, Christians working in government office in Mosul have started to receive written threats. "Warning to the Dirty Nazeris," the computer printouts say, referring to the word Nazareth, and ordering Christians to leave the city.

Computer hackers took down at least one Christian website in the Persian Gulf region. They replaced its usual homepage with this message:

"You have been Hacked.

"Islam means Peace. We, the Muslims want peace all over the world. But you don't want to be stay in peace. Don't think us weak. We are more more and more stronger than you that you cannot imagine. By creating this video you have just insulted our 'Islam' and our beloved Prophet Muhammad (.) and break the peace between you and us. Now we are in your cyber space to destroy it. We will hit you until you stop hitting us and want marcy for your did."

A check on the website Thursday showed a homepage that said the site is "under maintenance."

Yet amid the anger and violence, there have been some moments of peace.

Protests had spilled into Egypt during the days that followed the Sept. 11 uprising in Libya. Angry Egyptian Muslims stormed the American embassy in Cairo. It was well after midnight Sept. 14, and tear gas was in the air. In the nearby Kasr-el-Dobara Evangelical Church, fears were running high.

Unable to breach the embassy perimeter, some of the protesters turned their attention to the church. "Death to the worshippers of the cross!" they painted on the wall.

Inside, a pastor and about 30 young people prayed. The mob began to damage the downstairs bookshop. Some carried Molotov cocktails.

Then a man emerged from the crowd and started yelling. He said the Christians from the church had come to his aid, tending his wounds, during the 2011 popular uprising against the Egyptian government. Then another man stepped forward, and said the church had offered water, earlier that very day, to wash the feet of Muslims before prayers.

The crowd fell silent, turned, and left.

"These two men weren't just men," said a senior member of the church staff. "One day we will discover if they were men, or angels, just there to protect the church."