

One Dead as Islamist Mobs in Ethiopia Destroy Church Buildings

At least one Christian was killed and others injured when thousands of Islamic extremists set fire to 59 churches and at least 28 homes in western Ethiopia in the past five days, Christian leaders said.

More than 4,000 Christians in and around Asendabo, Jimma Zone have been displaced as a result of attacks that began on Wednesday (March 2) after Muslims accused a Christian of desecrating the Quran by tearing up a copy, sources said.

"The atrocity is still going on, and more people are suffering," said a source in Addis Ababa who is in close contact with area church leaders.

The Christian killed, believed to have been a member of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, has not yet been identified.

"One Orthodox believer, whose daughter is a member of Mekane Yesus Church, has been killed," an Ethiopian church leader told Compass. "Ministers were injured, and many more believers have been displaced."

A pastor based in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa noted that evangelical church leaders have reported the attacks to authorities and asked officials for help, but no action had been taken at press time.

"The church requested more police protection," he said. "The authorities sent security forces, but they were overwhelmed by the attackers."

After the destruction began at Asendabo, it spread to Chiltie, Gilgel Gibe, Gibe, Nada, Dimtu, Uragay, Busa and Koticha, as

Muslim mobs in the thousands rampaged throughout the area, sources said.

“Police at the site are not taking any action—they just watch what is happening,” said another source. “It is difficult to estimate the attack in terms of deaths, since we have no access to any location.”

Those displaced are in shelters in Ako, Jimma, Dimtu and Derbo, he said.

“We are very concerned that the attack that began on March 2 in Asendabo, which is the rural part of Jimma, is now heading to Jimma town,” he said.

The extremists also destroyed an Ethiopian Kale Hiwot Church (EKHC) Bible school building and two church office buildings, the source said. Of the churches burned, he said, 38 belonged to the EKHC; 12 were Mekane Yesus buildings; six were Seventh-day Adventist structures; two were Muluwongel church buildings, and another belonged to a “Jesus Only” congregation.

“Women and children are the most affected in this sudden attack,” he said. “It is needless to mention the believers’ houses and properties burned down. The overall estimated cost, may be worth over 60 million birr [US\$ million].”

Anti-Christian attacks in western Ethiopia in 2006 killed at least 24 people.

“Attacks on the church have been a common occurrence in predominantly Muslim areas of Ethiopia like Jimma and Jijiga,” the source said, adding that Christians are often subject to harassment and intimidation.

Asendabo, in Oromia Region, is about 300 kilometers (186 miles) from Addis Ababa.

The attacks erupted as heavy fighting was taking place at the

borders of Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia. Ethiopian troops were trying to repel Islamic extremist al-Shabaab troops from Bulahawo, Somalia, near Mandera, Kenya, with several casualties and hundreds displaced.

Ethiopia's constitution, laws and policies generally respect freedom of religion, but occasionally some local authorities infringe on this right, according to the U.S. Department of State's 2010 International Religious Freedom Report.

According to the 2007 census, 44 percent of Ethiopia's population affiliate with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 19 percent are evangelical and Pentecostal and 34 percent are Sunni Muslim.