

# Shooting of Witness Threatens Trial of Coptic Christians' Murderers

It's happening several times a week now, particularly in the towns and villages of Upper Egypt. Just a brief news report, citing an isolated killing here and there of a Coptic Christian by "unknown gunmen." Another statistic, usually just the name of the Copt, listing his age and his town or village.

But in mid-January, the murder of still another Coptic Christian in Luxor province, 315 miles south of Cairo, has triggered widespread panic among the 4,000 Christians living in the area of Nag Hassan and its surrounding villages.

For 18 months, Nag Hassan's Christian community has lived under the shadow of the deadly wave of anti-Christian violence following the ouster of Mohammed Morsi. On July 5, 2013, four Coptic men had been killed in Nag Hassan's al-Dabayia village in a Muslim rampage that left 42 Christian homes and shops badly damaged, burned and looted.

So when Coptic Christian Shahid Nesemis Saroufim was killed in Nag Hassan on Jan. 13, it did not take long to connect the dots, to perhaps understand why.

The previous day, the Luxor Criminal Court had held a conclusive hearing in the months-long trial against accused suspects from the al-Dabayia attack. At the next hearing, to be set sometime in early April, a verdict is expected against the 17 jailed suspects.

Saroufim was a cousin of Emil Naseem Saroufim, one of the four Copts killed in 2013. "My husband was targeted because he was one of the witnesses in the prosecution," Saroufim's widow Heba Eskander Farid told World Watch Monitor.

Just 20 days before her husband was killed, relatives of the 17 accused approached Fr. Basilus Naim of the Mar Youhanna Church, asking him to arrange a reconciliation meeting with the families of the four victims, to persuade them to drop the charges.

According to Girguis Noushy Habib, older brother of two of the four victims, the Coptic priest told them, "We can forgive our material damages—destroying, burning and looting our properties. But we cannot forgive the blood of our four martyrs."

"We have been threatened with death ever since we testified in the prosecution," Habib said. "We live in a state of fear and terror, especially now after the latest killing of Shahid. Our lives are in danger. They killed Shahid to terrorize us and pressure us to drop the charges against their relatives."

Fr. Basilus himself was threatened personally, finally pushing him to leave the village the day after Saroufim's murder.

Habib said that one of his widowed sisters-in-law was threatened by several men a few days before Saroufim was murdered, while she was buying milk from the village supermarket. "We won't leave you. What happened to you before will take place [again] soon," they warned.

"They said many times before to my husband, 'If you don't drop the charges on our relatives, we will make the Christian women in the village widows,'" his widow, Farid, said, pregnant with their third child, after a son of 6 and a daughter aged 4.

## **Two Murder Suspects**

Saroufim, 38, was shot and killed in al-Dabayia while riding his motorcycle just 500 meters from his home, past the house of two brothers, Mohammed and Hassan Baghdadi. According to an eyewitness to the shooting who requested his name be withheld,

the gunfire came from the supermarket attached to the Baghdadi brothers' home.

When the eyewitness rushed over to see if Saroufim was alive, he said Mohammed Baghdadi told him, "I've called the ambulance. I saw two masked gunmen on motorcycles shoot at Shahid and flee."

"But I saw the shooting coming from their supermarket," the eyewitness told *World Watch Monitor*.

Although police arrested Hassan Baghdadi a day later with one of the murder weapons in his possession, Farid said the Luxor prosecutor had declared that the man was mentally ill and sent him to a psychiatric hospital in Cairo. "But he is a very sane man," Farid said. "They did that to stop our rights, to drop the charges against him for killing my husband."

Despite a police warrant issued to apprehend Mohammed Baghdadi, he has so far eluded arrest.

A formal "reconciliation" effort led by the Egyptian Family House, an entity formed between Islam's Al-Azhar University and the Coptic Orthodox Church in 2011, continues to negotiate between the Muslim and Coptic parties in the Nag Hassan case.

"But there isn't any compensation agreement until now," attorney Ashraf Shakir told *World Watch Monitor*, although there have been ongoing individual attempts to forcibly "reconcile" the case. He noted that the repairs and rebuilding of the damaged homes and businesses have all been undertaken by the church.

"Our situation in the case is very strong, and there should be a fair judgment," Shakir said, in anticipation of the verdict expected in April.

But the tensions of life and death remain high in al-Dabayia village, as the Coptic Orthodox faithful continue their 40-day

vigil of prayers for the dead after Saroufim's death.

"There is a situation of fear and panic among all the Christians here," Fr. Moussa Nabih told *World Watch Monitor* on Feb. 12. "They are afraid that violent attacks against them will recur, especially after the verdict of the next hearing. The situation has become so dangerous for us here."