

What Happened When Police Blocked These Believers From Going to Church on Sunday

Tensions between Muslims and Coptic Christians in a village in Upper Egypt have reportedly softened following clashes at the weekend.

Copts in the village of Ezbat Al-Forn, in the Minya governorate, were stopped from holding Mass at a private home on Sunday (Aug. 20) because they had no permit. Local Muslims had reportedly complained that the Copts were meeting in the home illegally, which led to the clashes.

But the Copts processed peacefully through the village streets on Monday (Aug. 21) to celebrate the Feast of the Assumption of Mary, and all was calm, says the *Egypt Independent*.

According to the newspaper, the local bishop, Anba Macarius, "said that Muslims in the village have never objected to the prayers of the Coptic Christians in any place in Ezbat al-Forn".

The local authorities are reportedly "considering" the Christians' request for a license to hold religious services at the residential property while also searching for suspects involved in the violent clashes on Sunday.

"He added that the relations between the people are kind and neighborly, contrary to media reports that say Muslims object to Christian prayers ... [and] that prayers were held in the streets in peace and security, with no protest."

The *Egypt Independent* added that the Governor of Minya, General Essam Bedawey, acknowledged that "there are tensions between Muslims and Coptic Christians in some areas of the

governorate, and there is a comprehensive plan to address these spots”.

Bishop Macarius had previously highlighted that his parish alone, which includes only Minya city and its immediate surroundings, is home to 15 churches that have been closed by security order, and 70 villages and hamlets that have no church or any place to hold Christian worship.

In a statement issued last week, the bishop expressed his disillusionment “at the failure of negotiations with security authorities in Minya to reopen churches closed by security order” because churches either lacked security approval or were considered offensive to Muslims and therefore a threat to social harmony.

As World Watch Monitor has reported, Copts have experienced similar challenges in the villages of Kom El-Loufy, El-Galaa and also in Saft el-Khirsaa—a town of around 12,000, including approximately 70 Christian families, which has 10 mosques but no church.

Meanwhile, Watani reported in June that in the village of Dabbous in Samalout, near Kom El-Loufy, Copts have not been able to meet in their church since 2005.

The governorate of Minya, south of Cairo, is home to 5 million people, of whom 35-40 per cent are Copts, and has experienced the greatest number of sectarian attacks, with more than 75 targeting Christian residents in the past six years. {eoa}

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