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Egypt: Christians scapegoated after dispersal of pro-Morsi sit-ins

A detailed report into the attacks targeting Coptic Christian communities in August reveals the extent of the failure of the security services to protect the minority group, said Amnesty International.

The new report published today examines events during the unprecedented wave of sectarian attacks in the wake of the dispersal of two pro-Morsi sit-ins in Cairo on 14 August.

It details how security forces failed to prevent angry mob attacks on Christian churches, schools and charity buildings, setting them ablaze and razing some to the ground. At least four people were killed.

“It is deeply disturbing that the Christian community across Egypt was singled out for revenge attacks over the events in Cairo by some supporters of the deposed president, Mohamed Morsi,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“In light of previous attacks, particularly since Morsi’s ousting on 3 July, a backlash against Coptic Christians should have been anticipated, yet security forces failed to prevent attacks or intervene to put an end to the violence.”

Amnesty International urges the Egyptian authorities to conduct an impartial, independent investigation into these sectarian attacks, and to take immediate steps to prevent their recurrence. A comprehensive strategy to fight discrimination against religious minorities must be devised and implemented. Discriminatory laws and policies must be repealed.

“Failure to bring to justice those responsible for sectarian attacks sends the message that Copts and other religious minorities are fair game. The authorities must make it absolutely clear that sectarian attacks will not be tolerated,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

More than 200 Christian-owned properties were attacked and 43 churches were seriously damaged across the country in the aftermath of events on 14 August.

One Coptic Christian from the governorate of Fayoum described his dismay at the violence: “Why is it when there is a problem, Christians always pay the price? What do we have to do with the events in Cairo to be punished like this?”

Amnesty International visited sites of the sectarian violence in Al-Minya, Fayoum and Greater Cairo to gather evidence from eyewitnesses, local officials and religious leaders.

In several instances residents said mobs of angry men armed with firearms, metal bars and knives had ransacked churches and Christian properties. Many chanted slogans such as “God is Great” or used derogatory terms like “you Christian dogs” as they launched their attacks.

Historical and religious relics were desecrated. Graffiti left scrawled upon walls in the aftermath of the

attacks included slogans such as “Morsi is my President” and “They killed our brothers during prayer”.

The messages leave little doubt as to the sectarian nature of the attacks and link the events firmly to the crackdown against Morsi supporters in Cairo. Attacks were frequently preceded by incitement from local mosques and religious leaders.

“Given the fact that these attacks were in retaliation for the crackdown on pro-Morsi sit-ins, the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood said too little too late, and laid the blame on ‘thugs’ distancing their supporters from the attacks” said Hassiba Hadj Saharaoui. “They must condemn their supporters’ actions and urge them to refrain from sectarian attacks and the use of sectarian language.”

In Al-Minya, where most of the attacks occurred, a journalist, Zeinab Ismail, who witnessed scenes of violence, said attackers were armed with machetes and swords.

Some residents were attacked in their homes. The body of a 60-year-old Coptic Christian man shot dead at home in the village of Delga in Al-Minya, was later dragged through the streets by a tractor. After he was buried his grave was dug up twice.

“Any investigation must also examine the role of the security forces. Some incidents lasted for hours and recurred in subsequent days,” said Hassiba Hadj Saharaoui. “Why were the security forces unable to prevent and put an end to such attacks?”

There is a long history of abuse and discrimination against Coptic Christians in Egypt. A litany of attacks occurred under Hosni Mubarak, military rule and Mohamed Morsi.

The release of Amnesty International’s new briefing coincides with the second anniversary of a bloody crackdown by the armed forces on protesters, outside the state television building known as Maspero in Cairo on 9 October 2011, in which 26 Coptic Christians protesters and a Muslim were killed.

Impunity for these attacks is entrenched. For Maspero, only three low-ranking soldiers were sentenced to prison terms between two and three years for manslaughter.

‘Reconciliation sessions’ – the favoured method by authorities to resolve sectarian disputes in Egypt – have so far only consolidated the feelings of injustice among minority communities and allowed perpetrators to walk free. Proper mechanisms to protect religious minorities and safeguard their rights must instead be introduced.

“For too long the Christians of Egypt have borne the brunt of sectarian violence. This pattern of inaction by the authorities must change,” said Hassiba Hadj Saharaoui.

“Words of condemnation must be backed up by concrete steps to provide adequate protection to religious minorities. The state must ensure full reparation, including financial compensation, to the victims of sectarian attacks. The rebuilding of places of worship must be also be prioritized and legal obstacles to building churches immediately repealed. Without such concrete measures, Coptic Christians, once again, would just have been used as an excuse to settle political scores.”

Background:

Successive governments have failed to address discrimination and targeting of religious minorities in Egypt. Under Hosni Mubarak at least 15 major attacks against Copts were documented. Following the fall of Mubarak, under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, deadly sectarian clashes continued to take place. The situation also failed to improve under Mohamed Morsi, attacks against Copts continued and anti-Christian rhetoric was stepped up. Christian communities have for decades faced legal and bureaucratic hurdles to build and restore places of worship.