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## **Egypt: Government must protect Christians from sectarian violence**

There has been an unprecedented rise in sectarian violence across Egypt targeting Coptic Christians and the Egyptian authorities must take immediate steps to ensure their safety, Amnesty International said.

Coptic Christians have been targeted – seemingly in retaliation for their support of the ousting of Mohamed Morsi – since the violent dispersals of pro-Morsi sit-ins in Greater Cairo on 14 August. Several Coptic Christians were killed, while their churches, businesses, and homes have been under attack. “It is a shocking dereliction of duty that security forces failed to prevent these sectarian attacks and protect Coptic Christians. The backlash against Coptic Christians should have been anticipated following the dramatic rise in similar incidents since Mohamed Morsi was ousted,” said Hassiba Hadja Sahraoui, deputy director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.

“Attacks against Coptic Christians must be investigated and those responsible brought to justice.”

According to the Maspero Youth Union, 38 churches have been burned and an additional 23 partially damaged across the country. Dozens of homes and businesses have been looted and/or burned. More than 20 attacks on churches were documented in the Upper Egypt Governorate of Al-Minya, with more attacks recorded in Alexandria, Assiut, Beni Suef, Fayoum, Giza, North Sinai and Suez. Activists reported that in some instances, attackers desecrated graves considered sacred by Coptic Christians and conducted Muslim prayers inside the churches.

The situation appears to be especially dire in the Al-Minya Governorate, where local residents, including a police officer, told Amnesty International that Coptic Christians felt under siege by the alarming rise of sectarian violence particularly in the absence of protection by security forces.

On 15 August, the Prime Minister condemned the sectarian violence.

“Condemning the violence is not enough. The tragic attacks were no surprise given the inflammatory and sectarian language used by some Morsi supporters, scapegoating Christians for the crackdown they suffered,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

In one incident documented by Amnesty International, a Coptic Christian man was killed and at least three more injured when some participants in a pro-Morsi march attacked a Christian block in the area of Izbit al-Nakhl in Giza on 15 August. A number of Coptic Christian stores and cars were also set alight.

Local residents told Amnesty International that at about 5:30pm a march by Morsi supporters approached their block, using sectarian and inflammatory language in their chants, including: “what a shame, the nasara [derogatory term for Christian] are pretending to be revolutionaries.” As the march approached,

most Coptic Christians shut their stores and sought shelter inside. Some ran to the local church to seal it off from a potential attack. Those who remained in the streets were shot at and/or beaten.

When attackers approached, Fawzi Mourid Fares Louka decided to park his car inside the garage for safety. While he was closing the door, along with his nephew Khaled, the angry crowd reached the street. His nephew told Amnesty International what happened next:

“They were carrying metal bars, waving the al-Qa’ida black flag. Some of them were armed. There was random shooting in the air, on the buildings, and pictures of Pope Shenouda [hanging in the middle of the street]. They were insulting Christians, saying ‘Christian dogs, we will show you’, and shouting ‘Allahu Akbar’... We were just trying to close the door of the garage, when my uncle fell into my arms... I realized that he was shot in the head... I quickly closed the garage door behind us... They [attackers] were frantically knocking on the door, threatening to finish us off.”

The attackers also surrounded and beat Fawzi’s brother Boutros who was standing a few metres away, on the street corner. He was hit on the head with a bar, and stabbed in the back twice before managing to escape in the direction of the Church.

Another bystander, Nabil Zakaria Riyad, sustained shotgun pellet wounds to his legs, face, and stomach during the attack. He was standing at his front door on a street adjacent to where Fawzi Louka was shot. He continued:

“They were shouting ‘there is no God but Allah’ and ‘Islamic, Islamic’, and I heard gunfire... I saw them reverse the Tok Tok [three wheel vehicle used in small alleyways] that was transporting Fawzi to the hospital and breaking cars and stores... They were firing in the street, and while I tried to get closer to the front door, I was shot.”

Fawzi Louka’s relatives told Amnesty International that they lodged a complaint at the Marg police station, but thus far investigations do not appear to have started.

During a visit to the area on 18 August, Amnesty International researchers examined bullet holes on buildings on the street where Fawzi Louka was killed. The effects of burning and other damage to several stores and cars owned by Coptic Christians were clearly visible.

“In the current political stand off, both the Egyptian authorities and the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood have shamefully failed to prevent and stop attacks on Coptic Christians. Immediate measures must be taken to ensure their safety,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

## **Background**

Since the ousting of Mohamed Morsi on 3 July, there has been a notable rise in sectarian attacks targeting Coptic Christians, amid the failure of the security forces to intervene to put an end to the violence.

In another recent incident of sectarian violence on 3 August in the Governorate of Al-Minya, the authorities have not only failed to promptly intervene to put an end to the sectarian attack, but also appeared to be reverting back to old policies of addressing sectarian violence through “reconciliation” rather than justice. The incident was triggered by a verbal altercation between a Coptic Christian and Muslim at a coffee shop in the village of Bani Ahmed, 4 kilometres from Al-Minya city, over a nationalist song praising the Egyptian army. The Muslim man appeared to want to turn it off, given his opposition to the ousting of Morsi by the military on 3 July following popular protests. Hours later, a group of villagers from surrounding areas went on a rampage, attacking Christian stores, homes, and residents of Bani Ahmed – a predominantly Coptic Christian village. According to residents, at least 18 people were beaten and/or stabbed, while scores of Christian homes and businesses were looted and set on fire. Security forces arrived several hours later. About a week later, reconciliation sessions, some in the presence of local officials, took place pressuring Coptic Christians to withdraw complaints lodged at police stations in return for “safety”.

Discrimination against Coptic Christians has been prevalent in Egypt for decades. Under President Hosni Mubarak at least 15 major attacks on Copts were documented. Sectarian violence continued under the Supreme Council of Armed Forces and following the election of President Mohamed Morsi. At least six attacks on Coptic churches or buildings took place in 2013 during the final months of deposed President Mohamed Morsi's administration. No proper investigations have been conducted into the role and responsibility of the security forces in the violence.

Public document

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