

Egypt: Sectarian Attacks Amid Political Crisis
Scant Protection As Christians Attacked in Several Cities
By Human Rights Watch
23 July 2013

(New York) – Egyptian Christians have been targeted in several attacks since the military’s ouster of former President Mohamed Morsy. The authorities should urgently investigate the attacks, hold the perpetrators to account, and determine whether the police could have prevented or stopped the violence.

In the deadliest incident, on July 5, 2013, local residents brutally beat to death four Christians inside their home as police and a mob of residents surrounded the house, during a day of violence that erupted after a Muslim was found dead in Naga Hassan, a village 10 kilometers west of the city of Luxor in southern Egypt. Local residents also wounded three others and destroyed at least 24 Christian-owned properties. Witnesses and the police told Human Rights Watch that police did not stop a 17-hour anti-Christian rampage in the village until after the men were killed. Human Rights Watch visited Luxor and Naga Hassan, and interviewed at least 20 witnesses to the violence.

“Egyptian security forces should be on high alert to prevent and halt sectarian violence in the current tense and polarized situation,” said Nadim Houry, acting Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. “Egypt’s religious and political leaders should denounce the dangerous escalation of sectarian attacks.”

Since Morsy’s ouster on July 3, at least six attacks on Christians have taken place in governorates across Egypt, including Luxor, Marsa Matrouh, Minya, North Sinai, Port Said, and Qena. In many of the incidents, witnesses told Human Rights Watch that security forces failed to take necessary action to prevent or stop the violence. Authorities should hold accountable the people responsible for the sectarian killings and attacks on houses of worship and property, and investigate whether security forces took inadequate measures to prevent or stop the attacks, Human Rights Watch said.

In Naga Hassan, a mob surrounded the homes of two Coptic Christians after a Muslim was found dead and rumors spread that two Christian youth had killed him. The mob killed four Christians and wounded others. Only after the killings did the approximately 60 police present bring the situation under control.

In an earlier incident, on July 3, Morsy supporters looted and burned St. George’s Coptic Catholic church and al-Saleh church in the village of Delga, in Minya, about 150 miles south of Cairo. The attacks injured eight people – Christians and Muslims – a local media outlet reported. Police and army forces did not protect St. George’s during the attack and have not been there yet, its priest said.

Christian residents of Delga told reporters that most of the Christians in the area had fled, afraid to return home and unsure whether their homes have been burned.

In separate incidents in North Sinai on July 5, 6, and 11, unidentified assailants killed three Coptic Christians, including a priest, according to a witness Human Rights Watch interviewed and to media accounts, though it was unclear whether they were targeted because of their religion.

Other apparent sectarian attacks on Christian churches since Morsy’s ouster took place in Marsa Matruh on July 3, where two witnesses told Human Rights Watch that pro-Morsy protesters attacked St. Mary’s church, set fire to a security booth outside the church, and attacked a police station there, stealing two police vehicles. In Port Said on July 9, masked men attacked St. Mina’s church, according to a local media report.

The only sectarian attack in which police appeared to have intervened effectively was in Qena, on July 5. The police used teargas when Morsy supporters attempted to attack a church, preventing the assailants from inflicting damage on the building or injuring anyone inside, according to a local media report.

Authorities in Egypt should ensure that prosecutors promptly and impartially investigate allegations of sectarian violence, whether the victims are Christian or Muslim, and bring prosecutions as appropriate, Human Rights Watch said. The authorities should also investigate the adequacy of the police response to sectarian violence, and police officers who fail to act appropriately should be held to account.

Religious and political leaders should speak out against sectarian violence. State security forces should take measures to prevent sectarian violence, uphold the rights of religious minorities and facilitate the safe and voluntary return of people forced to flee their homes as a result of sectarian attacks.

“The Egyptian government should make ending sectarian violence a priority, or risk letting this deadly problem spiral out of control,” Houry said. “Prosecutors should thoroughly investigate and prosecute those responsible, including security forces, if they want to show they are capable of preventing future bloodshed.”

For detailed accounts of the incidents of the events in Luxor and other attacks, please see below.

The Luxor Area Attack

At least 20 witnesses who spoke to Human Rights Watch agreed that problems in Naga Hassan, a village near Luxor with a large Christian minority, started at about 2 a.m. on July 5, when the body of Hassan Sidqi Hefni, a 52-year-old Muslim resident of Naga Hassan, washed up on the bank of the Nile behind a local resident's house.

The circumstances of Hefni's death are still unclear. Residents told Human Rights Watch that the villagers believed two young Christian men seen in the area where Hefni's body washed up on the riverbank, Majdi Iskander, 18, and Shnouda Romani, 20, were responsible for the death. A local resident told Human Rights Watch that he woke up at about 2 a.m. when he heard Hefni, whom he knew, crying for help. He saw Hefni in the river, and a person he could not identify pushing him under the water, while another person standing on the bank looked on. He said that it was too dark for him to see the assailants.

Angry villagers began to gather when word spread of Hefni's death, until the crowd swelled to between 200 and 300 people. A police officer said he saw villagers chase Iskander and Romani and surround the house of Iskander's neighbor, while other villagers attacked Christians' homes with stones and Molotov cocktails. Iskander tried to hide on the roof; Romani escaped. The police officer, who was standing in front of the house where Iskander hid, said that some villagers managed to enter the house between 4:30 and 5 a.m. and beat and choked Iskander until they thought he was dead.

Although 15 or 16 officers were present, they could not control the mob, he said. The police realized that Iskander was not dead. They wrapped him in a blanket and took him in a Central Security Forces (CSF) vehicle to the central Luxor hospital, in order to lead the angry residents to believe he had died, the officer said.

Iskander was immediately transferred to Assiut hospital and treated for choking wounds and internal bleeding from the beating, according to a hospital employee that Human Rights Watch interviewed. At about 10 a.m., two police trucks arrived in Naga Hassan as the mob began to disperse for Friday midday prayer.

A local priest told Human Rights Watch that he was on the phone with a police officer from the police station at the nearby township of Daba'aya from 6 a.m. until 10 a.m. to find out what was happening. He then went to Naga Hassan, but the clashes seemed to have stopped and he was reassured by the presence of the two police trucks. “I returned [to the church] smiling,” he said, “I thought it was all over.” He said that at about 5 p.m., Christian town residents began calling him again, “panic-stricken,” because mobs had again begun to form and attack their homes.

Throughout the course of the day, groups of villagers also attacked, set fire to, and looted as many as 110 Christian-owned homes in the area, causing severe damage to 24 of them, according to witnesses and an official in the prosecutor's office. Residents of a nearby village drove by on motorcycles and shot two other Christian residents of the area at about 5 p.m., critically wounding one, Bolis Zaky Nassim, according to the official in the prosecutor's office, a hospital admissions employee, and Nassim's son, who witnessed the shooting.

At about 5 p.m., between 300 and 500 Muslim residents of Naga Hassan and surrounding villages began to gather and head toward Naga Hassan's main street. At about 8 p.m., close to 50 men broke into the home of Habib Noshi Habib and brutally beat to death two of his brothers, Muharib Noshi Habib, 38, and Romani Noshi Habib, 36, and Rassem Tawadros Aqladious, 56, who were seeking safety in the house. All suffered serious head wounds among their injuries. Other men beat to death Emil Nassim Sarufeem, 41, and attacked his nephew, Milad Emil Nassim, 25, seriously wounding him, as they fled from the house.

Human Rights Watch reviewed admission records at the central Luxor Hospital which initially received the bodies and documented severe brain injuries and skull fractures to Romani Noshi Habib, who died two hours after being admitted; slash wounds, skull fractures, and internal bleeding to Emil Nassim Serufeem, who died at 7 a.m. the next morning; and severe head injuries, including open head wounds and internal bleeding, to Milad Emil Nassim, who survived the attack. Muharib Noshi Habib and Rassem Tawadros Aqladious were dead on arrival, according to the records, which did not detail their injuries.

Photographs of the bodies of the four deceased viewed by Human Rights Watch showed numerous cuts and bruises that appear to have been made by blunt objects. Habib, Emil Nassim's cousin, told Human Rights Watch that he hid from the attackers in an inner courtyard under a bathroom window:

I woke up at 6 a.m. to a lot of commotion. I live on Kobri al-Gaban street, the main street in Naga Hassan, next to Emil [Nassim Serupheem]. I looked outside and saw hundreds of people running by, carrying metal pipes, shovels, and knives. My cousin Rafit Fowaz, who lives on the water, called me and said that people attacked his house and were attacking other Christians' houses. After a while things calmed down, but later in the day it all started again. I live here with Romani and Moharib, my brothers, and my friends Rassem and Emil and his nephew, Milad, also came to hide here. Girgis, our other brother, fled to Aswan with his children.

At about 8 p.m., [name withheld] broke into my house with two other men [one of whom he named]. At that point Emil and Milad escaped out the back. There were about 20 people standing in front throwing Molotov cocktails at the house, and suddenly men were streaming in, there must have been about 50 of them. I watched as several attacked Moharib. They beat him on his head and body with metal pipes and shovels. I ran and hid in the small internal courtyard, under the bathroom window. I knew when they were finished with Moharib because I heard them say, "There is no God but God." I also heard someone from outside say, "Yalla, finish it off." Judging from his accent he wasn't from here.

Habib said that four police officers wearing civilian clothes refused to help the men hiding in the house to escape. "There were 13 women and 7 men in the house, and many children," Habib said. "They took the women and the children in the police vehicles to the church, but they wouldn't take us."

Although as many as 60 police officers eventually arrived in Naga Hassan by around 6 p.m., they did not prevent the attackers from entering the house or bring the situation under control until after the four men had been killed. A local police officer told Human Rights Watch that the Luxor security directorate did not send more forces to the scene because of a protest taking place in front of Luxor's local government building that day.

A senior local police officer told Human Rights Watch that they had tried to control the mob, but without success. He said that seven or eight high-ranking police officers and about 60 CSF officers from Daba'aya and Luxor shot teargas and used batons against the mob surrounding the houses, but could not control the mob until after the four men were killed. "I didn't know what to do," the officer told Human Rights Watch:

Put yourself in my position, and ask yourself two questions. First, do you fire live fire on those people outside? Who will be killed, the people outside or inside? Second, as a police officer, you can't do anything without orders. What do you do if you don't get an order that will allow you to take more action?

Maj. Khalid Mamdouh, Luxor's director of security and the officer in charge of the police and CSF deployed in Naga Hassan on July 5, told Human Rights Watch that there was "no way" police could have controlled the situation. "These people do these things all the time, they are stupid people," he said. "There was no reason for the police to take any special measures, it's not [the police's] job to stop killings, we just investigate afterward."

Mamdouh, who said he was transferred from Cairo to the Luxor security directorate in early July, denied any sectarian dimension to the killings, and attributed the violence to the "savagery" of the people in the area. "You'll see, come back in a month and everyone will be telling you that nothing ever happened here," he said.

Habib said that an investigator in the Luxor prosecutor's office briefly visited Naga Hassan the day after the attack, and he gave him the names of 18 men he saw participate in the attacks. One he identified is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Habib also said he told the prosecutor he believed police were involved in the attack, but on July 10, when the prosecutor called Habib to Luxor for another interview, the prosecutor did not question Habib about police intervention in the incident.

An official in the Luxor public prosecutor's office, who declined to be named, told Human Rights Watch that according to the reports they received, throughout the day villagers attacked the homes of Christian residents with stones, pipes, and Molotov cocktails, damaging 24 homes, both early in the morning as villagers chased Iskander, and again between 5 p.m. and 10 p.m.

The official told Human Rights Watch that they were investigating the murders and property destruction but did not intend to investigate security forces' failure to contain the violence and prevent further violence, which escalated over a 17-hour period without any effective police intervention. He said that as of July 13, 10 people were suspects in the killings of the 4 men, and 4 of the 10 were in detention. Another 26 people, 12 of whom are detained pending further investigation, are suspected of participating in looting and destroying property in Christian-owned homes.

"Until now there is no probe into police behavior, and there won't be," the prosecution official said. "We are taking decisive measures to make sure nothing like this ever happens again, but the police were not at fault. They saved people. If they hadn't, the whole town would have gone up in flames. There will not be any investigation into police failures, because there is no need."

Muslim residents of Naga Hassan told Human Rights Watch that the police had failed to adequately intervene to stop clashes from escalating. "They didn't do anything," said Mohamed Gilani, principal of Naga Hassan's elementary school. "We've got used to solving our own problems here."

Muslim residents also told Human Rights Watch that police arrested between 45 and 50 men for the July 5 attacks, 7 of whom they held for 5 days without a detention order by prosecutors and who were then released without charge. The Muslim residents said they did not know the basis for the arrests of the men, and considered them to be "random."

They alleged that police had used excessive force in carrying out several of the arrests. Hamdi Ali Mohamed, 29, told Human Rights Watch that police officers arrested him at 12:30 a.m. on July 6, after he got into a verbal altercation with an officer who was playing a recording of Quran verses over the village mosque's loudspeaker at about 9:30 p.m., shortly after the four men were killed. "I told him it was provocative, and that it wasn't the right time," Mohamed said. "At about 11:30 p.m., three officers arrested me in the street – two to hold my arms, and one to beat me. My *gallabaya* [traditional long shirt] still has blood stains on it from the beating."

Mohamed Abdel-Mohsen, 32, told Human Rights Watch that police broke into his house at 1:30 a.m. on July 6, while he and his two brothers, Mahmoud, 28, and Ahmed, 31 were sleeping. He said police beat his brothers and arrested them. "They kicked in the door, and broke all the lights in the house, yelling insults at my brothers the whole time," Abdel-Mohsen said. "They handcuffed them and beat them with clubs and shoes, then took them into the street and beat them more there." He said his brothers were being detained, pending investigation, in the Awameya police station.

Another village resident who declined to be named said he saw police officers beat Mohamed Bughdadi Rashad, 28, on the side of his head with a gun as he arrested him.

After the attacks on July 5, many of Naga Hassan's Christians fled the town. Priests at a church in Daba'aya told Human Rights Watch that 40 Christian families sought refuge in the church. Of these, 10 families are still in the church, some because their homes are destroyed and uninhabitable, and others because they are afraid to return out of fear of reprisals.

The Minya Area Attack

On July 3, Morsy supporters looted and burned St. George's Coptic Catholic church and al-Saleh church in the village of Delga, in Minya, about 150 miles south of Cairo. The attacks injured eight people – Christians and Muslims – a local media outlet, al-Masry al-Youm, reported.

Father Ayoub Youssef of St. George's church told Human Rights Watch that on July 2, a group of Morsy supporters gathered close to the church shouting anti-Christian slogans. "They were shouting, 'Islamic! Islamic! Egypt is Islamic, despite what the Christians want!' and 'Christians are against the revolutionaries!'" Youssef said.

The following day, Gen. Abdel-Fattah al-Sissi announced on television the removal of Morsy from power. Al-Sissi was flanked by Egyptian political and religious leaders including the head of the Coptic Church, Pope Tawadros. Youssef said that immediately following al-Sissi's declaration, Morsy supporters attacked and looted the church and then set it on fire:

Five minutes after the army's statement, and once Pope Towadros started to talk, a group of more than 500 people attacked the three-story building. I live on the third floor. They were chanting "Sissi, Morsy is my president!" They looted the place taking everything in the nursery, gift shop, and library. They even took the water pump, the lamps, the electrical wires. They completely looted the place and then they set it ablaze.

Youssef said that later that evening he went to the police station to file a report. When he returned home he found that his apartment above the church had been robbed. "They took my personal belongings and my books and everything," he said. "And what they couldn't take, they vandalized. That night, they also looted the church and raided the homes of seven or eight Copts."

He told Human Rights Watch that one of the Coptic houses raided on July 3 was threateningly daubed with the words, "This is the house of Talayfas," the name of a Coptic family in Delga. Tharwat Bekhit, a local Coptic lawyer, told Human Rights Watch that mobs also looted 12 Coptic-owned shops, including gold shops and stationery and grocery stores.

Police and army forces did not protect the church during the attack and have not been there yet, Youssef said, despite his repeated calls for protection. Prosecutors have apparently not yet begun to investigate. "The few officers who were protecting the church left as soon as the crowds approached," he said. "I called the police, the military, anyone I could possibly reach, but no one has yet come to help."

Bekhit told Human Rights Watch that the same group of people who attacked St. George's shot at al-Saleh Church, but that no one was injured.

Christian residents of Delga told al-Masry al-Youm that most of the Christians in the area had fled, afraid to return home and unsure whether their homes have been burned.

Other Attacks on Christians

In separate incidents in North Sinai on July 5, 6, and 11, unidentified assailants killed three Coptic Christians, though it was unclear whether they were targeted because of their religion. Unidentified armed men kidnapped Magdy Lamei Sama'ei, a Christian salesman of power tools on July 5 in Sheikh Zuwaid city, near North Sinai's border with the Gaza Strip. On July 11, Lamei's body was found decapitated in a graveyard in Sheikh Zuweid after kidnappers demanded a ransom equivalent to US\$70,000.

On July 11, security sources reported the killing of another Christian merchant, 60-year-old Magdy

Habashi, abducted by unidentified gunmen on July 6 in Sheikh Zuwaid. His decapitated body was later found in a cemetery.

And on the afternoon of July 6 in Arish, three masked gunmen repeatedly and fatally shot Father Mina Aboud, a Coptic priest, as he was driving by an outdoor market.

A woman who lives in an apartment just above where the shooting occurred, told Human Rights Watch:

On July 6, at 1:30 or 2 p.m. I heard gunshots, so I ran to the balcony to see what was happening. I saw a white Verna car passing a gray car and blocking the way. Two masked men got out of the [Verna] car and were shooting at the [gray] car. Another masked man was standing by. They opened the gray car's door and shot the man inside, then threw him out, took his car and left. I screamed from the balcony and people started gathering around the body. I went downstairs and I saw him lying on the ground. [I saw where he] was shot in the neck, chest, and leg. It all took less than 10 minutes.

Other apparent sectarian attacks on Christian churches since Morsy's ouster took place in Marsa Matruh in the north west of Egypt, on July 3, where pro-Morsy protesters attack St. Mary's church, set fire to a security booth outside the church, and attacked a police station in al-Dabaa, a neighborhood in Marsa Matruh, stealing two police vehicles. In the Suez Canal city of Port Said on July 9, masked men attacked St. Mina's church. The police were responsive to a sectarian attack in Qena, in southern Egypt, on July 5, intervening with teargas when Morsy supporters attempted to attack a church, preventing the assailants from inflicting damage on the building or injuring anyone inside.

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