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## EGYPT 21 Christians murdered as religious violence ushers in the new year

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21 people have been killed and approximately 80 injured in an attack on a Coptic church in the northern port city of Alexandria in Egypt.

A car which was packed with nails and ball bearings and parked outside the Coptic Church of the Two Saints (al-Qiddissin Church) was detonated as up to 1000 Christians left a mass shortly after midnight on New Year's Eve.

Sectarian attacks have formerly been the result of an overflow of communal violence from such issues as contested church building and illicit relationships between members of the Muslim majority and Christian minority population.

The Egyptian interior ministry reported that the bomb was the work of a suicide bomber and "foreign elements", but also stated that the bomb was locally made. Adel Labib, the governor of Alexandria, denied the bombing was connected to tensions between Muslims and Christians.

2010 was a bloody year for the Coptic Christians in Egypt, who number some ten percent of the total population. It began with the murder of six Copts as they left a Coptic Christmas mass on 6 January. In March, a large church in Marsa Matrouh was attacked by a mob after building on its site was contested. Some 24 Christians were injured. In November, at least one Coptic protester was shot dead by the Egyptian state police and many more were injured after violent protesting broke out in the Talibiya district of Giza when the construction of a church was halted.

2010 has also seen increased attacks against Christians in other parts of the region. In November of this year, militants from the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), an al Qaeda front, threatened to attack churches in Egypt as part of the eradication of Christians from the Middle East: "Wherever they can be reached... We will open upon them the doors of destruction and rivers of blood." Their statement was published after an attack on the Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad in which church members were taken hostage and over 50 people were killed.

The ISI had cited reports of two Coptic women being held against their will by the Church in Egypt as motivation for the attack on the Baghdad church. It has been reported that they are being held to prevent their conversions to Islam to escape unhappy marriages. Pope Bob Shenouda, Head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, has denied such claims.

Copts complain of increasing marginalization in Egypt as society becomes more polarized and the government seemingly unable to protect them. The human rights group, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, has recorded a rising trend in sectarian violence against the Christian community.

Bishop Angaelos, General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the UK, said: "We are concerned that incidents of violence and terror against Christians in Egypt are increasingly spiralling out of control. They continue to go unchecked and unresolved, and their perpetrators are not brought to justice. This passiveness has sent out the message that Christians in Egypt are an easy and legitimate target. Today's event

demonstrates this and puts matters on a wholly new level... We therefore agree with the address given by His Excellency President Mubarak in which he states that 'a red line has been crossed'."

Andrew Johnston, Advocacy Director of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said: "We are concerned by the rising violence against Christians in Egypt and call on relevant parties to work towards protecting this historic minority of the Middle East. We are deeply saddened by the deaths of all those in Alexandria. Our thoughts are with the victims and their families at this time."

***Notes to editors:***

For more on communal violence in Egypt, read EIPR's report: "Two Years of Sectarian Violence, What happened? Where do we begin? An analytical study of Jan 2008 - Jan 2010", <http://www.eipr.org/en/report/2010/04/11/776>.