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EGYPT Protests continue as church torched and Coptic homes attacked

Egyptian Christians continued to protest today after the homes of Coptic Christians were attacked and the Church of St Mina and St George was torched during an attack on a village on the outskirts of Cairo on March 5h.

A mob of 4,000 Muslims attacked the village of Sool, Atfif in Helwan Governate on Friday in reaction to the relationship between a Christian man and a Muslim woman, forbidden under Shari'a law.

The woman's father was reportedly murdered by a cousin for refusing to sanction the honor killing of his daughter, and the cousin was in turn killed by the woman's brother. The attack on Sool allegedly followed the cousin's funeral.

During the attack the mob exploded gas cylinders inside the church of St Mina and St George, pulled down the cross and domes, and torched the building. According to news reports, the fire brigade was prevented from entering the village by the mob, and the army, which has been stationed for the last two days in the village of Bromil, 7 kilometers from Sool, initially refused to attend the scene of the attacks.

Following the violence, a crowd of at least 1,000 Coptic Christians were joined by Muslims on March 5 in a protest outside the headquarters of state television station Egypt TV, which they have vowed to continue until the perpetrators are apprehended.

Despite the initial unwillingness of the army to intervene, Egypt's new Prime Minister, Essam Sharaf, met with representatives from the Coptic community. There is an ongoing dialogue of engagement, with more meetings planned in future. Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, head of the ruling military council, told Reuters news agency that the army would rebuild the church before Easter holidays.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We offer our heartfelt condolences to the victims of the violence in Sool at the weekend. Although at first glance it may appear that the unity of the democratic uprisings has been shattered, the reaction of the federal government has been encouraging, and many Muslims have stood in solidarity with their Christian neighbors in the aftermath of the attack and in the ongoing protests. Community tensions will not disappear overnight; nevertheless these are small but positive indications that the ideals underlying the movement for change may be filtering through to higher authorities. CSW encourages the Egyptian Army to undertake a thorough and transparent investigation of the violence in Sool, and to honor their pledge to rebuild the church, not only as a good will gesture, but also as a sign of its commitment to the equality of citizenship that was such an admirable hallmark of Egypt's popular uprising."