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EGYPT Twelve dead in sectarian violence over weekend

Thousands of Copts and moderate Muslims have been protesting outside the state television building in Cairo since Sunday, following the weekend attack on Coptic Christians in the Imbaba district of Cairo by conservative Salafist Muslims, which left 12 dead, over 232 people injured and a church torched.

On Saturday evening a group of Salafist elders surrounded the Saint Mina Coptic Church in Imbaba demanding the release of a young woman, who they claimed was being held hostage there following her alleged conversion to Islam. The claim was proved false after a search of the church premises, nevertheless thousands of Salafists flocked to the area during the afternoon, and in response Coptic residents barricaded the street around the Saint Mina church. At around 7pm, firebombs were thrown at Coptic homes, shops and cars as well as Saint Mina Church and the Church of the Holy Virgin, and Copts retaliated with barrages of glass and stones. Seven Copts and five Muslims were killed.

Although the local community had called the police and military for assistance, no forces arrived until 10pm, and it was not until 11pm that they began to take action against the Salafists. By Sunday morning, the army had cordoned off Imbaba's main roads, however, fighting continued in side streets.

The Egyptian army has announced the arrest of 190 perpetrators, who will face military trials. The government also reaffirmed its determination to tackle sectarian violence and has announced that the master-minds of the attack have been captured, although no further details have been given.

As well as expressing anger at the weekend's events, protesters are demanding equal rights for all citizens, and justice in this and previous sectarian attacks. Some are also calling for the resignation of the commander of the armed forces.

There have been four major sectarian atrocities in Egypt since January, none of which achieved significant international media attention, and all of which were dealt with through traditional reconciliation processes. During such processes Copts are pressured to accept an out-of-court settlement, and as a result perpetrators go unpunished and justice is circumvented. Sources close to CSW have expressed fears that the government may attempt to make use of this process in this current situation.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "The weekend's events in Imbaba are deeply shocking. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of those who died and the many who injured in the violence. CSW welcomes the government's swift response in arresting the perpetrators; however, there must be accountability for events that occurred during the night itself. Particularly worrying are reports that the army simply stood by for a number of hours as churches were attacked and people were killed. If true, there must be accountability for such a serious dereliction of duty. Moreover, it is vital that the entire episode is dealt with through due process of law and not through a largely discredited reconciliation process that appears to legitimize a denial of justice to the Coptic community and to engender an atmosphere of impunity. The government must also make good on its promise to ensure better protection for Copts in the future, which has been articulated on a number of previous similar occasions, but has clearly been inadequately implemented."

Notes to Editors:

1. The Salafists claimed that a girl named Abir, from Upper Egypt, was being held at the Mar-Mina Church, and that her husband had received a call from her asking him to rescue her from the church. Rumors of her imprisonment were circulated via Twitter. The existence of such a woman remains unsubstantiated.
2. On Saturday afternoon Camilla Shehata, whom extreme Muslims had claimed was being held hostage in a church for converting to Islam, appeared on a Christian television show to announce that she was still a Christian and had never attempted to convert to Islam. Camilla's alleged captivity by the Church had been the reason used to justify various attacks on Christian targets by Muslim extremists, such as the attack on the Our Lady of Salvation Syriac Catholic Cathedral in Baghdad in October 2010.