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EGYPT | Murders Highlight Increasing Vulnerability of Religious Minorities

Four Shi'a Muslim men were killed June 23 in Egypt by a mob led by Salafi sheiks, in an incident that underlines the increasing vulnerability of religious minorities in the country.

The men died when hundreds of Sunni Muslim men attacked Shi'a homes in the village of Zawyat Abu Musalam in Giza Governorate as they gathered there on the afternoon of June 23. Among those killed were prominent Shi'a cleric Hassan Shehata and his brother. Disturbing footage has emerged on YouTube.com depicting the bodies of the victims being dragged through the streets and desecrated to shouts of "Allahu Akhbar." The attackers are also reported to have torched Shi'a homes and injured several people.

The deaths follow a marked surge in anti-Shi'a rhetoric and hate speech. Al Ahram news agency reports that Salafi sheikhs in the village had launched verbal attacks on Shi'as for the last three weeks, accusing them of being infidels and spreading debauchery.

Such inflammatory rhetoric has been ongoing since the visit to Cairo of former Iranian president Ahmadinejad in February but has become increasingly vitriolic as the civil war in Syria has progressed. In April, Dr. Mohamed Taha, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood's Guidance Bureau and head of the Brotherhood's pedagogy department, said the Egyptian people and government would not accept the existence or spread of Shi'a Islam in Egypt under any circumstances.

In May, Tharwat Attallah, a member of parliament for the Salafi Nour Party, described Shi'as as being "more dangerous than naked [women]," and "a danger to Egypt's national security," while his colleague, Abd El-Galeil El-Qassem, also from the Nour Party, said that Shi'ism would undermine the "essence of religion and the [Sunni] doctrine." During a Syria Solidarity Conference on June 15, which was attended by President Morsi, Salafi sheikhs are reported to have insulted Shi'as, inciting violence against them.

The murders in Giza mirror attacks over decades on Egypt's Coptic community, and also highlight a surge in such sectarian violence since the 2011 Uprising and the increasing vulnerability of religious minorities under the current regime. Members of the Salafi movement have been at the forefront of most of the recent sectarian incidents, the majority of which have been preceded by inflammatory and inciting rhetoric. As is generally the case during attacks on the Coptic community, eyewitnesses to the murders of the Shi'a men in Giza claim that despite being present, the police did nothing to stem the violence.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive at Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "We offer our condolences to the families of these four men. The situation for Egypt's religious minorities is becoming increasingly untenable due to a failure at governmental level to take action to address the pervasive culture of impunity that underpins sectarianism. We urge the Egyptian government to extend the same rights and protections to the country's religious minorities as to every other citizen, to take immediate action against anyone using hate speech to validate violence against vulnerable groups, and to direct the security services to take proactive measures to diligently apprehend and prosecute the perpetrators and inciters of sectarian violence from this time onwards."