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EGYPT | Church Calls for Three Days of Prayer for Peace, Reconciliation

His Grace Bishop Angaelos, General Bishop of The Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom, has announced three days of prayer “for peace, reconciliation and an end to needless violence and loss of life in Egypt,” commencing July 9 and coinciding with the end of the Coptic Orthodox Fast of the Apostles and the beginning of the month of Ramadan.

In a media release announcing the prayer days, the Bishop said “after witnessing millions of Egyptians across the whole nation and from all walks of life standing together to peacefully express their desire for a new Egypt, it is unfortunate that this unified effort is being undermined by needless violence and bloodshed.”

Egypt has witnessed several violent incidents since the ousting of former President Morsi in what is being termed a “people’s coup,” albeit facilitated by the army. The Ministry of Health has now confirmed that 51 people died and 455 were injured on July 8 outside a Republican Guard barracks in Cairo where pro-Morsi demonstrators had gathered, believing he was being held there. Events leading up to the deaths are contested, with the Muslim Brotherhood claiming the army fired without provocation on unarmed supporters as they prayed, while the army contends it was repelling an attack on the barracks and that gunmen affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood initiated the shooting. The interim president has set up a judicial committee of inquiry to investigate the killings.

A steady increase in attacks on the Christian community has gone largely under-reported, taking place primarily, but not exclusively, in Upper Egypt. The attacks follow accusations by several Islamist sources, including the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, that Christians were part of a “conspiracy” to remove Morsi’s regime.

On July 3, a march by Morsi supporters in the village of Dalga in Minya turned violent, with protesters attacking buildings belonging to the Coptic Catholic parish of St. George, setting fire to an ‘estraha’, used by priests to rest and reflect, burning down the house of a priest and

throwing Molotov cocktails at shops and houses belonging to Copts. Some local Salafis denounced the attack, stressing their solidarity and unity with Christians. Also on July 3, the Coptic Catholic Church of St George in the village of Delga in Deir Mawas, Minya Province, was looted and torched and the El-Saleh Church sustained heavy fire. Homes and businesses were looted and torched while two Copts were injured.

In Luxor, violence erupted after news emerged of a Muslim man who died from injuries after allegedly being attacked by some Christians. In response, groups of Muslims attacked the villages of Naga Hasan and Dabaya, leaving four Copts dead and 32 injured, three of whom remain in the hospital in critical condition. Twenty-seven houses belonging to Copts were also burned.

Early on July 9, masked gunmen opened fire on Mar Mina Church in al-Manakh, Port Said but escaped before they could be apprehended by the police and army, who were quickly at the scene. On July 6, in Masaeed in North Sinai, a priest named Father Mina Abboud Sharoubim was driving his car when he was stopped by armed assailants and shot nine times, thrice in the leg and six times in the head and chest. He later died from internal bleeding.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "We extend our condolences to the families who lost loved ones in violence over the past few days in Egypt. It is important that those responsible for the violence at the Republican Guard barracks are held to account; equally, those who are perpetrating attacks against the Christian community must be apprehended and charged. We stand in solidarity with Egyptians as they pray for their country at this critical time in their nation's journey to full democracy."