



## 8.1.16 EGYPT | Security Urged to Act After Video of Latest Attack

Homes belonging to Coptic families in Saft al-Kharsah village in Beni Suef Province, Upper Egypt, were destroyed by a mob July 22 amid rumors that one story of a man's home was being turned into a church.

The violence began when a crowd gathered after noon prayers and began hurling rocks and projectiles at the houses. In a brief video filmed from the balcony of one of the buildings, frightened children watch as the mob approaches before retreating indoors. The film continues, punctuated by the sound of breaking glass as objects hit the buildings, and rocks can be seen landing on the family's balcony.

Police later cordoned off the area to protect local Coptic families and at a reconciliation meeting, village elders agreed that Christians in the community would not use their homes as a church unless they received official authorization. The current law in Egypt states no church can be built without presidential decree.

On July 21, the Egyptian President Abdel el-Fattah el-Sisi condemned the recent spate of violence against the Coptic community. In a speech broadcast on national television, he spoke of national unity and equality before the law, adding that anyone who violates the law will be held accountable, even the President. Eighteen people have subsequently been reportedly detained in connection with the violence.

While sectarian attacks are not uncommon in parts of Upper Egypt, there has been a spike in the frequency of such attacks over recent months, often sparked by rumors of churches being built or romantic liaisons between Muslims and Christians. In May, an elderly woman was stripped and assaulted in the street over rumors that her son was in a relationship with a Muslim woman, in a case that drew widespread condemnation.

Responding to the recent spike in sectarian incidents, Pope Tawadros II, head of the Coptic Orthodox Church said, "I myself am patient and can withstand the conflict, but in front of me is a report on the sectarian violence against Copts since 2013, detailing 37 cases in Minya alone, which amounts to an incident every month... groups of Muslims burn Christian homes, thinking they are churches. This is not a social crime, but a deliberate attack."

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide said, "The video footage of the attack in Saft al-Kharsah is a disturbing and stark illustration of the unacceptable sectarian violence endured by Coptic villagers in Upper Egypt on an increasingly regular basis. We continue to call for the perpetrators of such violence to face criminal proceedings, as reconciliation sessions have done nothing to stem the frequency of these attacks. President Sisi's statement is welcome, but must be followed by practical measures to provide robust and timely protection for the Coptic community. This, together with pre-emptive action on the part of local security forces, is the only way to break a cycle of violence and impunity that is exacerbated by the imposition of reconciliation meetings which bypass the judicial process and carry no consequences for perpetrators. We also urge the House of Representatives to issue a law regulating the construction and renovation of houses of worship in a manner that guarantees the right of Christians to worship in community with others, as a matter of utmost urgency."