CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY WORLDWIDE USA
VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS

12.5.16

EGYPT | Coptic Community Attacked Because of Rumors

Buildings belonging to the Coptic community of Al-Nagameesh village in the Sohag governorate, Upper Egypt, were attacked Nov. 25 by a mob that thought a community center was being used as a church.

A crowd emerged from the local mosque, after noon prayers and proceeded to the Coptic community, setting ablaze the four story building they believed was being used as a church. The Coptic community had applied for permission to build a church; however, the building in question was used as a care home for the elderly and a nursery. The mob then proceeded through the village, torching a number of houses and businesses belonging to the Coptic community. Several people were injured during the attack; however, there was no loss of life.

The mob subsequently blocked access to the village for the emergency services and stopped the water supply to prevent fires from being extinguished. Police eventually arrived on the scene, using tear gas to quell the crowd before arresting 29 people, and later releasing 15 of them.

Since there is no church in the village, the Christian population, which numbers around 2,000, had been using the building as a focal point while their formal application for a church building was pending. Tension had mounted in the community three days prior to the attacks when the local priest, Father Margorious, held a memorial service in the community center to mark the anniversary of the death of his father. This led to speculation among locals that the center was functioning as a church.

Following the attacks, the Governor of Sohag, Ayman Mohamed Abdel Monaem, ordered the convening of a reconciliation meeting between the elders of both faith communities.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has reported similar attacks in Upper Egypt this year; one followed rumors that a new building on a Coptic man's land was being turned into a church while in another, an attack was launched on a block of houses because one floor was rumored as being used as a church. This second attack was filmed by a family living in the building.

Although the Egyptian Parliament passed a law in September aimed at making the application process for the construction of churches more accessible, CSW and other human rights NGOs have voiced concerns that the law may entrench discrimination between Christian and Muslim houses of worship.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "It is both distressing and disappointing to learn that once again a Coptic community in Upper Egypt has suffered a sectarian attack following a false rumor. Our thoughts and prayers are with this community as families come to terms with the loss of their homes and businesses. We condemn this attack in the strongest terms and urge the security services to thoroughly investigate this incident so those responsible for criminal damage enjoy no impunity and are held fully accountable before the law. We also continue to urge the cessation in these instances of the use of reconciliation sessions that precede or supersede a judgement by a court of law. Unfortunately, these attacks underscore once again the fact that the construction of churches is an incendiary issue, and highlight the short comings of the church building and reconstruction law. The Egyptian Parliament must press for a stronger law governing the construction of all places of worship, which would ensure equality of citizenship and send a strong signal to anyone seeking to divide the country along sectarian lines."