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EGYPT | Coptic Father, Son Killed

The bodies of two murdered Coptic men were found Feb. 22 in the city of Al-Arish in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, the latest in a series of sectarian killings since Jan. 31.

State security officials told the Daily News Egypt newspaper that the body of 65-year-old Saied Hakim was found with gunshot wounds to his head, while his 45-year-old son, Medhat, had been burned alive.

The murders are the latest in a series of sectarian killings in Al-Arish that began Jan. 31, when 35-year-old Coptic trader, Wael Youssef, was shot dead in his grocery shop by masked men. This was followed by the murder of 40-year-old veterinary surgeon, Bahgat William Zakhar, who was shot in the head Feb. 12 as he left his clinic. Adel Shawky, a 57-year-old laborer from the Samaran district of Al-Arish, was shot in the head Feb. 13. On Feb. 16, Gamal Tawfik Girgis, a teacher who also owned a shoe shop, was shot dead in a crowded market. According to AFP news agency, on Feb. 23 an unnamed 40-year-old Coptic man was shot in the neck at his home in Al-Arish, which was subsequently set on fire.

While no group has claimed responsibility for the murders, on Feb. 20 the Daesh (IS) affiliate known as the Sinai Province (Wilayat Sinai, formerly known as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis) released a video railing against Egypt's Christian population, describing Christians as their "favorite prey" and identifying the Coptic Orthodox Pope and Christian businessmen as specific targets.

The perpetrators have managed to commit these murders in broad daylight and in busy areas without being intercepted. According to the Watani newspaper, the security services are concentrating manpower on guarding entry points to the city; however, local people feel the killers may be Islamists already residing in Al-Arish. As the killings have continued, members of the Coptic community are reportedly leaving the area in increasing numbers.

Commenting on the murderers of Saied and Medhat Hakim, Hossam El Refaay, the Member of Parliament for the City of Al-Arish stated, "The investigations regarding the burnt Coptic citizen and his killed father are still ongoing. There is no information regarding the identity of the perpetrators of the incident until now. We, as parliament members representing North Sinai, ask on a regular basis for rapid revision of the security strategy in the governorate."

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "Our thoughts and prayers are with the family of Saied and Medhat Hakim following their tragic loss. We are pleased to hear investigations are already under way. We appreciate the difficulties involved in combatting a terrorist insurgency for which security personnel constitute a key target. However, given the concerns of the people in Al-Arish that these murderers may have already penetrated the city, we urge the Egyptian government to reinforce the security presence within Al-Arish and to consider conducting house to house searches that are sensitive to the rights and freedoms of innocent civilians but rigorous enough to uncover the perpetrators."