

Muslims Set Church Ablaze

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Muslims Set Church Ablaze But Egyptian Security Implicates a Christian Copts

(AINA)

In a continuation of the ongoing wave of arson attacks on Coptic places of worship, the Church of St. Abaskharion Kellini, in the village of Ezbet Bassilious, Beni Mazar, was burnt down at noon on July 11 by Muslim village inhabitants. No one was injured.

A source in Bani Mazar Diocese told Free Copts advocacy the fire was instigated and directed as usual by State Security, aiming "to prevent prayers in new churches throughout both the Upper Egyptian provinces of Minya and of Beni Suef."

Reverend Abraham Phillobos, pastor of the torched Church told Coptic News Bulletin that the Security authorities are trying to falsely implicate the Copt Reda Gamal.

The Church was officially inaugurated on July 3 by the Bishop of Beni Mazar and was licensed for prayer. It was closed on that same day by State Security 'for security reasons and to avert a sectarian crisis,' and was placed under continuous guard.

Eyewitnesses named three Muslim village inhabitants Ahmed Abdelghani, Ahmed El-Qatawy and Eid Sayed Ahmad of torching the Church after spraying it with kerosene, according to Mikhael Fares of Copts United advocacy.

"The arson suspects went inside the church from a back door, but came out from the front of the burning Church in full view of the security guards," said an eye witness to Coptic News Bulletin. "Guards were there and just watched; when they heard explosions they went and stood far. They saw everything and did nothing, which is evidence of collusion."

"The State, the Security authorities and the Muslims all do not want any Churches, and the Muslim village inhabitants torched it because they just do not want any Churches," an eyewitness who wished to remain anonymous told Coptic News Bulletin. "We have been warned by security not to talk to anyone especially with the Coptic media from abroad."

The Copts in the village of Ezbet Bassilios, Bani Maza, 190 km south of Cairo applied and got a license for a Church in 1979, however, Security placed hurdles and the church, which was never completed, was closed since 1997 for security reasons. According to Copts United it was only through the continuous efforts of the Church leaders to convince security that prayers in that Church do not pose a threat to the village or social peace, that the church was reopened for prayers

last week.

The Fire brigade arrived two hours late, after the Church roof had completely collapsed, eyewitnesses said. "Only the holy alter was untouched by the fire."

Copts United reported that when some Christian villagers of Ezbet Bassilious went to the police station to file a report on the incident, and named the suspects, they were detained and threatened to change their statements.

The violence that took place in the last three weeks in Ezbet Boushra-East on June 6 and Ezbet Guirgis Bey on July 3 in Upper Egyptian El-Fashn by Muslim mobs was directed at social services buildings belonging to the Church, on 'suspicion' that they might be converted to churches, without any of the offenders in both attacks being charged.

The scenario is different in this latest incident in Ezbet Bassilious, which lies only 30 km from El Fashn Diocese. It involves a new Church, which is licensed and the Egyptian security is trying to tamper with evidence to falsely implicate a Copt for setting the Church ablaze, in order to allow the offenders again to escape punishment.

Bani Mazar is in Minya province, which this year has experienced the largest number of incidents of sectarian violence, with cases in the districts of Maghagha, Bani Mazar, Samalut and Mallawi.

By Mary Abdelmassih