

# briefing

## Egypt

*Attack on Abu-Fana Monastery, El Minya*

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## **I. Executive Summary**

On 31 May 2008, three monks were kidnapped and tortured and several more shot in an attack on the Abu-Fana monastery in El Minya province, Egypt.

CSW conducted a fact-finding visit to the monastery in August 2008 and was able to carry out interviews with a number of the monks affected by the violence. However, the CSW delegation was prevented by state security intelligence officers from visiting those parts of the monastery which sustained the worst damage.

Given the long history of similar attacks on the monastery, identifying the exact reasons behind the May attacks remains difficult. However, the negligence with which the incident has been dealt with by the Egyptian security forces is clear and a cause of great concern.

Following previous attacks on the monastery, the state organised “reconciliation meetings” between the local Bedouin population and the monastery to try to broker peace. Despite the fact that these agreements have subsequently been broken, the state authorities have failed to bring to justice those responsible for the attacks. Instead, official statements have repeatedly dismissed the incident as an ongoing land dispute, ignoring the severity of the violence faced by the monastery and its monks.

The head of the Coptic Church, Pope Shenouda III, initially refused to participate in any further reconciliation meetings until those responsible for these latest attacks were brought to justice. However, given the pressure and media focus on the land dispute, Pope Shenouda entered into discussions with the unofficial committee to settle the land dispute. Celebrations for the settlement of the land issues were planned for 9 September 2008; these were boycotted by the Coptic Church, until the successful resolution of the criminal court cases. This agreement was subsequently challenged by the Bedouins. Consequently, a new agreement was signed on 21 September 2008, where all charges are due to be dropped, and all those in prison, released.

CSW is concerned that the perpetrators of these crimes remain at large. Furthermore, future attacks on the monastery and wider Coptic community are likely to recur due to the failure of the government and local authorities to promote a culture of genuine tolerance and equality and to address the persistent patterns of sectarian and ethnic violence in the region.

## **2. Recommendations**

CSW calls on the international community to urge the Egyptian Government to:

- Ensure that justice runs its full course, with the kidnappers and attackers responsible being arrested and tried and with full reparations being made to the monastery;
- Address police negligence in handling the aftermath of the attacks;
- Ensure that any reconciliation agreements are adhered to by all parties concerned and that these agreements are not used to negate culpability for criminal acts;
- Take steps to prevent the intimidation and pressure of the local Coptic community by state security intelligence officers;
- Establish a robust policy to provide adequate security for all Egyptian citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation.

### 3. Incident details

#### 3.1. Attack on the Abu-Fana Monastery and kidnapping of monks

On 31 May 2008 at 5pm, approximately sixty armed men attacked the Abu-Fana monastery after workers began construction of a wall surrounding the monastery. The attackers began destroying the wall and caused extensive damage to a nearby chapel.

A number of monks' cells were set on fire, while a mushroom farm and apiary were also destroyed. A tractor, computer, a range of farming tools and a number of church items were stolen from the monastery. A statement released by the Coptic Orthodox Church identified at least one million LE (approximately £95,000) of damages and theft to the monastery.

During the violence two novices sustained gun shot wounds, and at the time of CSW's visit both men required additional surgery to treat their extensive injuries. Another priest was shot in the foot with a shotgun leaving him with multiple shrapnel wounds. A priest who was working on the cultivated land at the time of the attack was confronted by several men who beat him with the butts of their machine guns. As a result he sustained multiple wounds to his shoulders, back, feet and left leg. In addition to the priests, civilian workers at the monastery were also severely injured.<sup>1</sup>



Abducted monk attacked in face with stone



Injured worker

As the attackers were leaving, three monks were kidnapped and taken to the local village of Qasr Hur. During their captivity, they had their hands tied behind their backs and were beaten throughout the night by local Bedouins.<sup>2</sup> One monk was hit in the face with a stone, rendering him blind for several days, while another had his leg cleanly broken. In addition, all three monks were beaten repeatedly with guns and sticks and were whipped with electrical cable. They were then made to walk barefoot through a thorny field, where they were thrown against the thorns. The monks were also repeatedly told to spit on the cross, and say the *shahada*.<sup>3</sup> One of the monks then had his head pushed into the sand and stepped on. Having been held captive for approximately twelve hours, the monks were dragged through the local streets before being dumped in a nearby

<sup>1</sup> The images used in this briefing constitute a small proportion of those obtained through sources in Egypt or else taken by CSW. Although some of these images are available on the internet, due to security concerns and the sensitivity of the situation, no photograph used here should be used without CSW's prior permission.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'Bedouin' is used here to denote the local community referred to by the Egyptian media as 'Arabs'. CSW has opted to use the term 'Bedouin' in order to minimise confusion for non-Egyptian readers of this briefing. In Egypt, traditionally nomadic people who live in rural areas are referred to as 'Arabs', rather than Egyptians.

<sup>3</sup> The *shahada* is the Islamic creed which is recited as a declaration to convert to Islam. *Shahada* in Arabic is: "La illaha ill Allah, Muhammadur Rasul Allah"; in English: "There is no God but Allah, Mohammad is the Messenger of Allah".

field. At the time of CSW's visit to the monastery, the monks were still recovering in hospital from their physical injuries.



*Injured monk: victim of whipping*



*Injured worker*

Sadly, this is not the first time that the 4<sup>th</sup> century monastery at Abu-Fana has suffered attack. It has been attacked by local Bedouins at least twelve times since 2004.<sup>4</sup>

Some reports in the Egyptian media have alleged that there was an exchange of gunfire between the monks and the Bedouin villagers, resulting in the death of Khalil Mohammed, one of the alleged attackers of the monastery. This version of events is unlikely, however, due to the fact that the monks at Abu-Fana do not possess firearms. CSW has also received confidential reports of state security intelligence officers attempting to elicit false information 'proving' that the monks were in possession of firearms through intimidation and threats of mistreatment. However, none of the involved parties, nor the officials and the Egyptian media, deny that shots were fired at the monastery.



*Shells found at the monastery following the attack*

### **3.2. Land dispute**

Various state bodies involved in this incident, along with the local media, state that the most recent attack on Abu-Fana was based upon a land dispute triggered by the monastery and had no sectarian dimension.

The area of land which is at the heart of the dispute was purchased eight years ago as a patch of desert. The monks began cultivating the land six years ago. The frequent attacks began following the successful cultivation of this desert land.

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<sup>4</sup> Some sources put the number of attacks since 2004 as high as eighteen.



*Abu Fana Monastery; the disputed land is the green patch on the far right.*

Due to the frequency of these attacks, the monastery applied for, and obtained, permission to build a wall surrounding the monastery grounds. The attack in May 2008 was sparked by the beginning of the construction of this wall.

Some local reports state that the monks were impinging on the Bedouins' land, yet CSW's visit to the monastery revealed that there is between 200–300m of uncultivated desert between the monastery's land and the nearest Bedouin settlements.



Barren land between the monastery wall and the fields of Bedouins

Egyptian law on desert cultivation is complex, and the land ownership claims by the monks and the Bedouins is an administrative case demanding an urgent legal solution.

However in this situation, the Egyptian Government has failed to uphold justice and principles of equality as enshrined by the Egyptian constitution in the aftermath of an incident resulting in material and physical harm, kidnapping and coercion.

### **3.3. Police and state negligence and complicity**

A number of factors surrounding this incident have given cause to call into question the effectiveness and impartiality of both the police and the state's handling of the situation.

Police arrived several hours after the attack began, despite the local station being located just 2km away. None of the alleged attackers from the local community have been detained by the police, despite being identified by the monks and known by both the police and the local community. Following the incident, rather than focusing on arresting the attackers and working on the release of those priests who had been kidnapped, police proceeded to interrogate each monk individually for approximately four hours.

Fifteen people have been arrested in relation to this incident, but it is claimed that none are those identified by the monks as being directly responsible for the attack. Included in this group is a Christian contractor employed by the monastery. Rifaat Fawzi and his brother, Ibrahim Fawzi, are both currently in police custody as suspects for the murder of Khalil Mohammed. According to a number of church sources, neither was present at the time of the attack.

Following the incident, Samir Abu Loula, a prominent member of the local Bedouin community, appeared on a talk show along with the monastery's lawyer, which was aired on national television. During this show, Abu Loula admitted attacking the monastery, and stated that his son, Abdullah, had attacked it in the past. The lawyer then produced an arrest warrant for Abu Loula, stating that he should be arrested and brought to justice according to Egyptian law. Following the program, Abu Loula made a brief court appearance, only to walk free.

The fact that the attackers can boldly boast of their actions on national television and give similar interviews to the press without any fear of legal repercussions indicates a disturbing culture of impunity that is flourishing due to acute failures on the part of the Egyptian authorities. In an interview with CSW, a high-ranking government judge confirmed that the incident involved a strong degree of institutionalised discrimination. This is not only evident in the complacency of the police, but in the comments of the governor, General Ahmed Diaaeddin, who cited a land dispute as the cause of the trouble, whilst ignoring the actual attacks. Diaaeddin has also asserted that the incident involved an exchange of fire between the monks and their attackers.

To date, no action has been taken by the state to protect the monastery from further attacks. Although there is now a regular police presence at the entrance of the monastery, it serves more to control visits to the monastery by international press and observers. On 8 June 2008, two visitors were assaulted by local Bedouins on their way to the monastery, requiring hospital treatment.

### *3.3.1. Reconciliation meetings*

Following one of many attacks in 2006, official papers were drawn up and signed by both parties during one of several post-attack 'reconciliation meetings'. 'Reconciliation meetings' consist of religious leaders being brought together by the relevant government officials, following a sectarian incident to make peace. This usually takes place at the expense of the perpetrators of the crimes being brought to justice, essentially placing the perpetrators on an equal footing with the victims while bypassing the law.

During the meeting, the Bedouins admitted to attacking the monastery and monks, and made a pledge not to attack it again. This was reinforced with the condition of a 500,000LE fine that would be payable following any future attacks. Furthermore, the Bedouins pledged to help construct the disputed wall. This meeting was attended by the mayor and a number of high ranking local police officials. Despite being publicised in some Egyptian media since the last incident, none of the terms of this agreement have been honoured.

Following the 31 May attacks, the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Shenouda III, initially refused to participate in any further reconciliation meetings until those responsible for the attacks were brought to justice. This stance was echoed by calls from the Coptic Ecclesiastical Council,

asking President Mubarak to personally intervene to take steps to ensure that any further attacks were prevented.

However, following the intense media focus portraying the incident as a simple land dispute, Pope Shenouda finally entered into discussions with the unofficial committee appointed to settle the land dispute. A settlement was reached in late August in which the Coptic Orthodox Church gave up 25 acres of agricultural land and 70 acres of non-agricultural land, in return for permission to build a wall around the monastery and its remaining land.

This outcome is concerning given that permission to build the wall was guaranteed within the terms agreed during the 2006 reconciliation meeting. There was significant disquiet over the partiality of this outcome; especially given the state's negligence in dealing with the violence inflicted on the monastery and its monks. CSW is especially concerned that the agreement may further prevent the likelihood of the perpetrators of violence being brought to justice.

This initial agreement was subsequently challenged by the Bedouin population over the failure of the monastery to compensate for the death of Khalil Mohammed and for their stated involvement in the attack. Consequently, a new agreement was signed on 21 September 2008, where both the monks and the father of Khalil Mohammed agreed to all drop charges, resulting in the release of the 13 arrested Bedouins and Rifaat and Ibrahim Fawzi. However, at the time of writing, neither part has yet gone to the prosecutor's office to request that the charges be dropped, despite being scheduled to do so on 23 September 2008.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Egypt has a long history of violent attacks against its Coptic minority, often resulting in damage to both individuals and church property. On 28 May 2008, the owner of a large jewellery shop and three of his workers were shot dead by two masked men on motorbikes at midday; all four murdered men were Copts. Nothing was stolen. Although neither the motivation behind the attacks nor the identity of the perpetrators are known at present, this incident is one of many attacks on Coptic-owned residences and businesses. In late July, another Coptic jeweller was beheaded and his shop was looted in Kafr el-Sheikh. The grotesque nature of the murder has raised doubts that the theft took place purely from financial motives.

CSW has repeatedly raised concerns over ongoing sectarian violence in Egypt and the reluctance of the Egyptian Government to pursue justice and take proactive steps to stop the occurrence of such events. Often any arrests following violent attacks ultimately result in the acquittal of suspects or in mock reconciliation meetings. Alternatively, the attacks are depicted as sporadic, or as perpetrated by mentally unstable individuals, as in the case of attacks against three churches in Alexandria in April 2006.

These recurring patterns raise significant concerns. Unless the Egyptian Government tackles the structural and social basis of these tensions and seeks to promote a culture of genuine tolerance and equality, Egypt will continue to suffer clashes triggered by trivial disputes. Given the long history of attacks on the Abu-Fana monastery, it is clear that the Egyptian state has failed in its responsibility to provide adequate security, pursue justice and address the root causes of the attacks.

*Sources: BBC, Watani, Al-Jazeera, Al-Ahram, Reuters, AFP, Daily News Egypt, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA), CSW fact-finding visit*