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# **Muslim throng converges on worship site of Coptic Church in Egypt**

## ***Priests evicted, building shuttered.***

Morning Star News (19.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2VPtiU6> - Police in Upper Egypt evicted Coptic priests and shuttered their church building after an Islamist mob converged on the site over the weekend, according to reports.

Muslim villagers in Manshiyet Zaafarna, Minya Governorate, attacked the church of Mar-Giris (St. George) at 1:30 p.m. on Friday (Jan. 11), after mosque noon prayers, according to a statement by the office of the Bishop of Minya and Abu-Qurqas, headed by Coptic Orthodox Bishop General of Minya Anba Makarios.

The next day, according to the bishop's statement as cited by Watani News, a mob of about 1,000 Muslim villagers descended upon the church building, demanding that it be closed.

A video posted on Facebook shows a narrow street packed with male protestors chanting "Leave, leave," as well as Islamic chants such as, "No other God other than Allah."

Police pacified the mob by giving into their demands, according to Watani. They evicted two priests and the few remaining congregants inside and closed the building, which brought an elated response from the crowd.

"It appears to indicate that extremists now hold the upper hand," Makarios said in the statement, "and appeasing them is the way out of problems."

The statement pointed out that this latest closure is especially disappointing in the wake of claims by high-ranking government officials that they support freedom of religion in the country.

"This comes in the wake of declarations by the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmad al-Tayyeb, in favor of churches, also positive talk and actions by President Abdel-Fattah a-Sisi that every Egyptian has the right to practice his or her religion of choice, and to Coptic Pope Tawadros's efforts on that front," read the statement, according to Watani.

The village, which is about 250 kilometers (155 miles) south of Cairo, is home to about 1,000 Copts, according to church officials.

Harassment against the church started on Coptic Orthodox Christmas Eve about a week earlier, when Muslim protestors barged into the church building hours after a special service.

"As long as there is no deterrent action, others will be encouraged to behave in the same manner [and get away with it]," the bishop's statement said. Makarios has consistently voiced objections to many closed churches in Minya Governorate.

This month, three churches have been closed in Minya Governorate, according to the news site Copts Today. Days before the one in Manshiyet Zaafarna, a place of worship was closed in Al-Mansour village, and not long before that, one in the city of Minya, according to the report. Watani has also reported on closures in the village of Sultan Basha in Minya last summer.

The media center for the Egyptian Cabinet made a statement denying news reports that three churches closed in Minya in response to angry Muslims. The statement stressed that authorities encourage freedom of worship as it is guaranteed in the law and the constitution of the country. It added that news reports were only rumors that aim to divide the country.

Ishak Ibrahim, of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, confirmed the closure in Manshiyet Zaafarna, according to advocacy group Coptic Solidarity. Ibrahim told Coptic Solidarity that the sectarian violence in Minya may be due to the high number of Christians there, as well as area poverty.

"This may be the only space available for people to vent their anger against the state," he said. "They are taking it out ...on the weakest link, the Christians."

Egypt's Christians face discriminatory laws in building and maintaining houses of worship, which give Muslims a pretext to attack the churches, according to human rights advocates. Assaults are not properly prosecuted under the law, but rather matters go to formal "reconciliation meetings" in which community elders gather to discuss a compromise, which usually ends in Christians losing their worship rights, rights advocates say.

A church building law passed in 2016 with the hope that it would bring equality to Christians, but it was badly written, implemented poorly and perpetuated many of the discriminatory policies, they say.

Egypt ranked 17th on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2018 World Watch List of the countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.