

EGYPT: One protester killed, dozens injured and arrested in Coptic clashes with police

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Security forces throw rocks at demonstrators from the top of a bridge.
Credit: Agence France-Presse

The Interior Ministry said a riot started just after dawn in the Omraneya district when hundreds of Copts tried to "illegally transform" a Christian community center "into a church without obtaining the necessary authorization for doing so."

Demonstrators broke windows, sabotaged residential buildings and blocked the road leading to the area. "With our blood and our souls, we will sacrifice our lives for you, oh cross," the protesters chanted.

Police dispersed the crowd by firing tear gas and rubber bullets. Protesters responded by throwing Molotov cocktails at security officers, who then hurled rocks at protesters from a nearby bridge overlooking the construction site.

Makarios Jad Shukr, a 19-year-old student, was shot in the leg and died on his way to hospital, officials said. Unnamed medical sources said three other protesters were seriously wounded and remained in critical condition.

About 20 police officers were among those injured. Ninety-three people were arrested.

A few hours after the clashes, marchers took their protest to the headquarters of the Giza governor at Ahram Street, which connects Cairo to the Giza pyramids.

The governor told Egypt's official news agency, MENA, that rioters tried to storm the building but failed, adding that the governorate's deputy director and the commander of Giza's central security were injured before security forces intervened with tear gas.

Two priests were summoned by the general prosecutor for interrogations concerning their involvement in the demonstrations.

The Interior Ministry later issued a statement offering regret for the injuries and loss of life, and saying that "repeated police requests to cease violence were ignored by the demonstrators, putting the safety of local residents at risk, at which point security officials had no choice but to control and disperse the gathering through the use of tear gas."

Copts, who make up about 10% of Egypt's population of 82 million, have long complained of "discrimination," especially when it comes to building churches in this predominantly Muslim country.

"People here are very discriminated against us [Copts]. Why are they stopping us from building the church?" protester Sameh Rashid asked. "Every street has a mosque and every church has a mosque next to it."

Although most Copts live in relative peace among Muslims across Egypt, sectarian tensions have dramatically increased in certain areas over the last few years.

Wednesday's events come a week after a mob of Muslims set 10 Christian homes on fire after rumors spread that a Coptic man and a Muslim woman were secretly dating in a remote village in the governorate of Qena, 400 miles south of Cairo.

Three Muslims are still on trial for the Jan. 6 slaying of six Copts and a Muslim security guard outside a church in a drive-by shooting in the town of Nagaa Hammadi.