

Egypt Acquits All Muslim Murder Suspects

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Judge blames Coptic clergy for inciting El-Kosheh hostilities.

Instead of convicting the Muslim murder suspects accused of killing 21 Christians in last year's El-Kosheh massacre, a judge in southern Egypt has accused the local Coptic clergy of responsibility for the three-day rampage.

In his opening statement before announcing the verdict on February 5, presiding Judge Mohammed Affify accused three priests in the predominantly Christian village of failing to put a stop to the rioting.

During the mayhem, which erupted between December 31, 1999, and January 2, 2000, twenty-one Christians were killed and 260 of their homes and businesses destroyed or looted in El-Kosheh and surrounding villages in southern Egypt's Sohag governate. The only Muslim victim was shot dead accidentally by a fellow Muslim.

Singling out Fr. Gabriel, Fr. Bessada and Fr. Isaac by name, Affify stated that the three priests "shoulder the moral responsibility for escalating the events," and urged church authorities to discipline them.

According to Coptic activist lawyer Mamdouh Nakhla, the judge's statement of his personal opinion constituted a direct violation of Egyptian law and judicial proceedings, "all of which require the judge to be impartial in any litigation before him." Nakhla said he planned to submit a memorandum of appeal next week to overturn the verdict.

"But we shouldn't put all the blame on our judiciary system, or on the judge," editor Youssef Sidhom of the weekly "Watani" newspaper told Compass after the verdict was released. "We should shed light on the lousy, inefficient work that has been done by the police. The police have presented insufficient evidence, so they have left the dirty work for the judge to do."

In its formal verdict, the Sohag court acquitted all but four of the 96 suspects in the El-Kosheh trial, including seven defendants who had eluded arrest. A total of 57 Muslims were being tried, 38 of them for murder. The most serious charges against the 32 Christian defendants were looting, arson, and attempted murder.

According to Judge Affify, the prosecution "appeared to have had trouble identifying who was responsible for which acts" during the trial, which began last June. He justified the lack of convictions as being due to insufficient evidence, contradictory testimony, inaccurate official investigations, commonality of charges, and exaggerated reports.

Four Muslim defendants were found guilty of lesser crimes connected with the New Year's weekend massacre. None were present in the court when the verdict was announced, since Judge Affify had ordered the surprise release of all 89 defendants at the conclusion of trial hearings in early December.

Affify explained the unprecedented, bail-free release of murder suspects as a concession to approaching Ramadan and Christmas holidays for Egypt's Muslim and Christian citizens. But skeptical Coptic activists declared it a ruse to allow the perpetrators of the violence to escape the country. Although initially promised on January 9, the verdict was postponed without explanation until February 5.

The stiffest penalty of 10 years in prison was meted out to Mayez Amin Abdel Rahim, a Muslim found guilty of possession of an illegal weapon during the El-Kosheh riots. According to Nakhla, the same man had been charged in a separate, unrelated court case of killing a Muslim named Aiman Heshmat Hamdy, and of attempted murder.

The three other Muslims were found guilty of deliberately setting afire a truck trailer, with one given a two-year jail term and two given one-year sentences.

Delivered amid tight security, the verdict was over in 15 minutes. Foreign journalists were barred from entering the court, guarded by riot police in full gear and plainclothes policemen on nearby rooftops.

News coverage of the February 5 verdict was minimal, buried in the back pages of the crime sections in major Egyptian dailies. The light sentences were "not altogether unexpected," the Associated Press reported, describing them as an apparent "attempt to avoid flaring further sectarian violence."

But Coptic Bishop Wissa of nearby Baliana village denounced the blanket acquittal of all the murder suspects as an open incitement to more killings and injustice.

"All the murderers were acquitted. That means Muslims are encouraged to kill Christians. They are being told, 'Go ahead. Kill Coptic Christians,'" the bishop told Agence France Press. "This verdict means that the life of Christians has no value."

The El-Kosheh massacre was Egypt's worst clash in 20 years between the country's predominantly Muslim citizens and Coptic Christians, who constitute at least 10 percent of the population. It was preceded by a controversial murder investigation in the same village 16 months earlier, when police were accused of mistreating and torturing 1,000 Coptic villagers to force confessions implicating a Christian as the culprit.