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Blast At Egyptian Church Kills 21

Health and security officials say a bombing outside a Christian Coptic church has killed 21 people in the northern Egyptian city of Alexandria. Most of the victims were worshippers who were killed while leaving the church after a New Year's Mass shortly after midnight.

"I don't know what happened," church member Amgad Zakaria told Reuters. "I was making a call and suddenly I found everybody dead and scattered. Everybody was bleeding and I ran away. I was just going out of the church, after the priest ended the service, and this happened."

The deadly attack sparked further violence, with hundreds of Christians from the church clashing with police and then entering a nearby mosque in a confrontation that led to fighting and stone-throwing between Christians and Muslims. Some cars were set alight in the fighting.

Police used tear gas to disperse the crowds. Ambulances were also at the scene, with medical personnel gathering body parts scattered by the blast.

No one claimed immediate responsibility for the attack, which security officials say could have been the result of a car bombing or a suicide bomber on foot.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak attempted to portray the blast as nonsectarian in nature, saying, "Wicked terrorists targeted the nation, Copts, and Muslims." But the attack is certain to stoke religious tensions in Egypt, where Coptic Christians make up only about 10 percent of Egypt's mainly Sunni Muslim population of 79 million.

The New Year's attack took place despite heightened security around Egypt's Christian churches, including restrictions on parked cars outside the churches.

Hallmarks Of Al-Qaeda

Today's blast is said to bear the hallmarks of Al-Qaeda, which counts a number of Egyptians among its top leaders and ideologues. Mubarak's government has been largely successful in suppressing Islamic extremism in Egypt -- the most populous Arab nation, located at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and the Mediterranean.

Recently the Islamic State of Iraq, a militant group linked to Al-Qaeda that claimed responsibility for an attack on a Christian church in Baghdad, threatened the Egyptian church over its treatment of two Coptic Christian women who converted to Islam in order to get divorces.

The women were taken into seclusion by the church last year. Islamic hard-liners have protested the move, accusing the church of forcing the women to renounce Islam. The church denies holding the women against their will.

In Alexandria, local Christians like Victor Farag say they believe Al-Qaeda was behind the attack.

"[The people who organized the explosion] had a prior arrangement with people here, because Al-Qaeda members wouldn't come from Iraq. There are many people here working for Al-Qaeda," Farag said.

The leader of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Benedict XVI, urged world leaders to defend Christians against abuse and intolerance in the wake of the attack.

Violence against minority Christians has been rising throughout the Middle East. A series of bomb attacks on December 30 in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, left two dead and more than a dozen others wounded.

compiled from agency reports

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