



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on August 19, 2013

Egypt Update: Police Killed, Christians Attacked

At least 24 Egyptian policemen riding on two buses near the town of Rafah — a city in the Sinai Peninsula on the Egyptian-Gaza border — were killed in an attack by unknown terrorists on August 19. [BBC News reported](#) that there were conflicting reports about the details of the attack.

Security sources quoted by the Associated Press said that four armed men stopped the buses and forced the police to get out before shooting them.



BBC noted that it is too early to determine if the Sinai attack is in direct response to the ongoing conflict across Egypt since the ouster of President Mohamed Morsi on July 3 and the crackdown by the interim government on pro-Morsi protesters. There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but Egypt's interior ministry blamed "armed terrorist groups" for the attack.

It is also not known if the attack was in retaliation for the deaths of 36 Islamists who died while being transported to a prison outside Cairo on Sunday night. Egyptian officials said the prisoners had suffocated in the back of a prison van from the effects of tear gas, which was fired when the prisoners rioted.

[AFP, citing a border official](#), reported that Egypt closed its Rafah border crossing on Monday following the deadly attack.

Egypt has reversed its decision concerning the border more than once since last week, when it said it would close the crossing indefinitely. It was partially reopened on Saturday, according to the Hamas-run interior ministry in Gaza, but the latest attack again prompted its closing.

The border between Egypt and the Gaza Strip is seven miles long and is protected by concrete and steel walls that are more than 25 feet high. The Rafah crossing is one of only three border crossings out of the Gaza Strip and the only one to the south.

An AP report carried by Israel's [Haaretz](#) newspaper stated that the militants forced the two mini-buses to stop, ordered the policemen, who were in civilian clothes, out of the vehicles, and forced them to lie on the ground before they shot them to death. The report cited officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media.

Egyptian state television also reported that the men were killed execution-style.

Amidst the backdrop of violence and unrest across Egypt, attacks against Christian churches and schools and Christian-owned businesses and homes have escalated. Such anti-Christian violence is not unusual when authoritarian, yet largely secularized, regimes in Muslim nations are toppled and Islamist militants flourish during the ensuing breakdown of law and order.

Egypt is home to an estimated five to 15 million Coptic Christians, who make up an estimated 10 percent of the Muslim nation's population — the largest Christian community in the Middle East. Most of these belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, while fewer than a million are divided



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among the Coptic Catholic and various Coptic Protestant churches. However, with the rise of anti-Christian violence, all Christians in Egypt are now at risk.

A [report from CNN](#) cited Bishop Angaelos, the Cairo-born head of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom, who said he was told by colleagues in Egypt that 52 churches and numerous Christians homes and business were attacked in a 24-hour period that started Wednesday, August 14.

Angaelos said that an investigation of the church attacks should be conducted, and stated his opinion that the sheer scale of incidents suggests they were orchestrated, rather than the result of spontaneous unrest.

“We would want the people who have done it to be brought to justice because I think they are trying to do something which is much more dangerous,” he said. “It’s not just about burning churches, it’s about burning churches to initiate a response that then spirals into even greater violence — and that is a very, very dangerous game to play.”

Angaelos confirmed that the plight of Christians has become worse since Egypt’s popular revolution overthrew former President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, noting: “In the past two-and-a-half years, we’ve had more deaths of people just because they are Christians than in the last 20 years.”

The report also cited Ishak Ibrahim, a researcher with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, who told CNN he had confirmed attacks on at least 30 churches so far, besides attacks on church-related facilities, such as schools and cultural centers. Among the Christian churches set on fire were St. George Church in Sohag, a Nile River city south of Cairo; and Prince Tadros Church in Fayoum, southwest of Cairo.

CNN noted that these attacks, and others, have been blamed on supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood — the Islamist movement that is engaged in an ongoing confrontation with the interim government that replaced deposed President Mohamed Morsi.

Pope Tawadros II, the Coptic Orthodox Church’s leader in Egypt, has suspended weekly public events for fear of attacks on Christian congregations.

Not all Muslims in Egypt are supportive of the anti-Christian attacks, however. Father Boktor Saad, pastor of Virgin Mary Church in Kafr Hakim, said after extremists set fire to and looted the church that he believes that a small group of extremists were responsible for inciting groups to make the attack.

Saad and his church staff credited moderate Muslims with putting out the fire at Virgin Mary, and halting further attacks on Coptic Christians’ homes and businesses.

A [Fox News report](#) quoted the Maspero Youth Union, identified as a Coptic Christian youth movement, which denounced what it called a “retaliation war” against Egypt’s Copts. The group accused Morsi supporters of targeting them in response to Coptic Pope Tawadros II’s support for the coup that ousted Morsi.

As the chain of tumultuous events and changes in government that have occurred since the removal of former President Mubarak in 2011 continues, word comes that Egyptian judicial officials have ordered Mubarak — who was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2012 — [freed from jail](#). Mubarak’s lawyer, Fareed El-Deeb, told Reuters News that his client will be released from jail within the next 48 hours, after a prosecutor cleared him of a corruption charges.

Mubarak was found guilty and received a life sentence last year for his failure to stop the killing of some 900 protesters during the 2011 Revolution. However, his sentence was overturned on appeal and



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he is now being retried. Mubarek's successor, Mohamed Morsi, is currently being detained at an undisclosed location.

Photo of Mohamed Morsi supporter demonstrating in Cairo: AP Images

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