

Islamist separatists torch churches in violent riots in Zanzibar

Country/Region: Tanzania, Africa

Supporters of a separatist Islamist movement attacked churches and other Christian property in violent riots in Zanzibar.



The riots broke out in the capital, Stone Town
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Hundreds of members of the Association for Islamic Mobilisation and Propagation (UAMSHO) clashed with police during protests, which started in the capital, Stone Town, an historically important tourism centre, on Saturday 26 May, then spread to other areas over the ensuing days.

They torched a number of churches, including one in Mpendae and one in Tomondo; a Christian centre in Bububu was also set alight. An Assemblies of God church in Kariakoo was damaged and a senior church leader's vehicle burned.

One minister whose church was attacked said rioters invaded the building, poured petrol over it and set it ablaze, reinforcing the fire with burning tyres.

The Islamists, who were armed with clubs, machetes and iron bars, also torched homes and bars, destroyed transport and communication systems, and blocked roads.

Zanzibar Commissioner of Police, Mussa Ali, said:

The rioters were threatening people's lives by torching churches and blocking roads... We couldn't tolerate them as they were destroying government and people's properties.

Despite police and witness statements to the contrary, UAMSHO has denied having any part in the violence. But on Monday 28 May, 30 members of the group arrested in connection with the riots appeared at court charged with illegal assembly and causing unrest.

The Islamist group had launched the riots in protest against the arrest of senior members of its movement. UAMSHO is strongly opposed to the government and has called for a referendum on Zanzibar's independence from mainland Tanzania.

Analysts say the Islamist group has been gaining support since Zanzibar's main opposition Civic United Front party formed a government of national unity with the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi party. Zanzibar is a semi-autonomous, predominantly Muslim archipelago.

Zitto Kabwe, mainland Tanzania opposition MP, said:

We should never allow a few disgruntled people to plunge us into chaos over religion so as to achieve their own political goals.