

## Disappearance of Christian girls prompts protests in Egypt

Country/Region: Egypt, Middle East and North Africa

Egyptian Christians are reeling over the suspected abduction of two Christian teenage girls, arson attacks on Christian homes and threats to kill a church leader in three separate incidents.

Cousins Christine Ezzat Fathy (16) and Nancy Magdy Fathy (14) from Minya, Upper Egypt, went missing on their way to church on Sunday 12 June. Their families accused two young Muslim men of kidnapping the girls, and there are reports that ransom payments were demanded for their return.

Following their disappearance, hundreds of Christians staged a two day sit-in outside the Minya Security Headquarters, calling for action by the authorities to search for the girls.

They were found by police nearly two weeks later in Cairo wearing burqas; the girls apparently said that they had converted to Islam of their own free will and refused to return to their families. But the families' lawyer, Dr Naguib Gabriel, said it was possible the girls were pressurised to say they had converted voluntarily. The girls' conversion has been declared invalid by the country's leading Islamic scholars because they are minors.

The abduction and forced conversion of Christian girls, who are married against their will to Muslim men, is sadly a recurring story in Egypt. Since the revolution in January, there has been a surge in disappearances of Christian girls; one church leader in Cairo estimated that at least 21 young girls had gone missing from his parish alone.

### Opposition to churches

Egyptian Christians have also come under attack over the contentious issue of church buildings.

In the Upper Egyptian village of Awlad Khalaf, a mob of nearly 200 Muslims torched eight homes belonging to Christians on Saturday morning. The attack was prompted by a rumour that a house that is being built by one resident will be turned into a church; the construction site was attacked, and eight homes were looted and torched. Three people were injured.

Elsewhere, hundreds of Muslims surrounded a church in the village of Beni Ahmed West, near Minya, threatening to kill the church leader, who was locked inside with a number of worshippers during a morning service last week. Eyewitnesses reported that the Muslim mob, some of whom were carrying weapons, were chanting, "We will kill him and no one will prevent us." One of the ringleaders said that they would "cut him to pieces".

After five hours, security forces arrived and escorted the church leader to safety.

Muslims have been targeting the 100-year-old church since March when they tried to block construction work, despite the fact that the church held a renovation license. They threatened to demolish the building and demanded that the church leader and his family leave the village; he was given a 35-day deadline, later extended to 50 days. Muslims started gathering near the church last week when they learnt that he was defying the ban.

These tensions surrounding church buildings come as a draft law on places of worship in Egypt is being scrutinised by the country's religious leaders. The bill, which stipulates that building a new place of worship will be allowed only if it is 1km away from an existing one, has been criticised as too restrictive and impractical. A new place of worship will also require the consent of the local governor.

Though the bill applies to all places of worship (while existing restrictions apply only to church buildings), it is feared that Christians will continue to be discriminated against in the application of the new legislation. Muslims are often hostile to the construction of churches and have carried out numerous attacks on buildings and Christian communities as a result.



Tensions flare over Muslim opposition to church buildings in Egypt  
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