Ecumenical outcry follows Coptic Christian killings: An attack in Egypt

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The drive-by gunfire killing of six Coptic Christians in Egypt at their church on January 6, the eve of their Christmas celebration, has drawn widespread shock from the Vatican and church leaders in Europe, the Middle East and Australia.

Jerusalem Lutheran Bishop Munib Younan has denounced the killing of the Christians and a Muslim security officer. Some nine others were injured in the attack in the upper Nile city of Nag Hammadi. Younan said January 11 that he offered support to the patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria.

"The attack is horrifying and puts fear in the hearts of Christians in Egypt," Younan said from Beirut, where he was attending the general assembly of the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches.

"We are horrified and denounce this violent act, that instead of our people, our Christian Copts, celebrating Christmas and the feast of incarnation, they had to celebrate the feast of the cross," said Younan, bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land.

In Rome, Pope Benedict XVI condemned the "deplorable attack which the Egyptian Coptic community suffered in recent days, during its celebration of Christmas."

Of Egypt's 83 million people, Coptic Christians account for about nine percent and Muslims 90 percent.

Setri Nyomi, general secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, who was attending the Protestant meeting in Lebanon, also called for Egypt to provide security for all Egyptians. The Evangelical Church of Egypt, Synod of the Nile, reported having experienced discrimination over many years before the recent wave of violence.

Nyomi expressed concern that Chris tians in the Middle East are leaving in increasing numbers because of a lack of security and a dearth of job opportunities.

Three suspects arrested after the Nag Hammadi killings have denied they were behind the attack, Egyptian officials said.

Authorities said they suspected the attack was in revenge for the alleged rape of a 12-year-old Muslim girl by a Christian man in November.

After the killings, sectarian riots in nearby villages were reported to have injured at least six people. The area is 40 miles north of Luxor, an archaeological center with remnants from the era of the Pharoahs.

[Nag Hammadi is across the Nile from the site of one of earliest Christian mon asteries in third- and fourth-century Egypt. The city's name is associated with the 1945 discovery of a buried jar containing early Christian and gnostic papyrus texts, including the only complete copy of the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas—documents that had later surfaced on the Cairo antiquities market.]

Through modern-day emigration, Coptic Christians have spread around the globe into communities that are freer to speak of persecution back in Egypt.

In Melbourne, Australia, an ecumenical liturgy and demonstration was planned for January 14 at St. Paul's Anglican Cathedral, followed by a procession to the Egyptian consulate and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs.

"We want the whole world to know what is happening in Egypt to the Christian community: that every week, every month, there are continuing attacks against Christians and it's escalating," said Coptic Bishop Suriel of Melbourne and Affiliated Regions. Australia has an estimated 20,000 Coptic Christians, he said.

The bishop said there has been a string of attacks on Copts "but these attacks are not taken seriously" by the Egyptian police.

Protestant and Anglican church leaders planned to joint the Coptic Christians at the Melbourne service and rally and at another event elsewhere in the state of Victoria.

The president of the Victorian Coun cil of Churches, Jason Kioa, who is also a leader of the Uniting Church in Australia, said: "We offer our prayers for peace, justice and goodwill for all. But for that to occur, people of peace, justice and goodwill must act together, to bring these things into reality." –*Ecumenical News Service*