

Christians in Libya face rising attacks

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With the growing strength and number of extremist Islamic groups, Libya has become a dangerous place for Christians, who are the targets of kidnapping and murder at the hands of extremists who now control most of the country.

In February an armed militia pledging allegiance to the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria released a video allegedly showing the beheading of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians. The video led to Egyptian air strikes on Libyan soil.

In the chaotic aftermath of the fall of Muammar Qaddafi's regime, the influence of the militias that sprang up to fight the dictator began to grow. At first they were charitable, offering medical services and financial support to communities left destitute by the revolution. These militias were disparate and mostly formed along tribal, political, or family lines. But those that defined themselves by religion proved the most dangerous.

Some of the groups had strong ties to al-Qaeda, having fought with them against the American occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. They had also been exchanging cash and weapons with militant Islamist organizations. To consolidate their power, the more extreme militias also made alliances with local Islamic political parties and extended their control over urban districts.

Libya shares a large, porous border with Egypt. Egyptian citizens, many of whom are Coptic Christians, often seek jobs in oil-rich Libya. It's estimated that hundreds of thousands of them live in the country. There is also a large Filipino migrant community believed to number over 10,000, the vast majority of whom are Christian. A large percentage of these foreign immigrants have left Libya out of security concerns, but others are reluctant to leave, having embraced the country and its culture as their own.

Celeste Almagro is one of the few remaining Christians in his congregation. He arrived in Libya 27 years ago and spent nine years as a parish priest in Tripoli, serving mostly Filipino Christians. In 1997, when Libya established diplomatic relations with the Vatican, he was appointed bishop of Benghazi. In an interview in late January, he said that the majority of the Christian workers and missionaries have fled the country under pressure from their embassies and families. Nonetheless, he sees it as his duty to stay and help the Libyan people.

“Some of us have left, but a group has stayed because this is our country and we want to support the people,” he said. “We count it as a privilege to pray constantly for Libyans and Libya. Our hope is increasing that peace and security will be restored soon.”

Almagro left his church building and went into hiding in early January due to increased violence.

The past two years saw a large increase in attacks on the Christian community in Benghazi. Most of the victims have been Egyptian Copts. An attack in January 2014 resulted in the death of seven Egyptian Christians, whose bodies were found on a beach near Benghazi after they were shot in the head and chest. An armed group reportedly entered the building where the Egyptians were residing and demanded to know the religion of each individual. They then kidnapped eight Christians, one of whom managed to escape, while the other seven were executed. On December 25, two Coptic Christians, Wajdi Malak Hana and Issa Lamae, were murdered in Benghazi. According to local sources, an armed militia arrested and tortured some 50 Egyptian Christians, accusing them of being missionaries.

The militias have also closed down and destroyed churches. According to Sonia, a 60-year-old Bulgarian nurse in Benghazi who has lived in Libya since 1997, her local congregation is now meeting in private homes rather than in church because of the radical militias threatening her community.

“We know the Libyan community well, and although most Libyans are Muslims, nothing like this has ever happened before,” she said.

When asked why she has decided to remain in Libya, she replied that terrorism has spread all over the world and attacks could occur anywhere. “The Libyan people need doctors and nurses. I cannot leave now,” she said.

In January the government said that Islamist militias executed 14 soldiers captured near the southern town of Sabha. Foreign Christians living in that town have had mixed experiences.

Cartiwar, a 36-year-old mother of three who is trying to save enough money to move to Europe, said in early February that as a Christian she does not feel threatened. "People are very kind to me even after they learn that I am not a Muslim," she said.

Enrik, a 29-year-old from Nigeria, has not been as warmly received. "I've had some scary interactions with men on the street," he said. "One day I was attacked because I was wearing a cross. The men said I should have covered it up."

The power of the elected Libyan government is limited as the militias now exercise control over the cities of Benghazi, Derna, Tripoli, and Surt.

At the Jarif medical center in Surt, militants broke into the residence of an Egyptian Christian doctor, killing him and his wife. Their 13-year-old daughter was kidnapped and later found dead several miles away. It was in this city that the 21 Egyptian Copts were kidnapped in January. Their photographs were published on a jihadist website where the kidnappers boasted of capturing Egyptian "crusaders." —

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