

Monday, 8 April 2013

Death toll in Egypt's sectarian clashes rises to two



The death toll in clashes between Muslims and Christians in Cairo has risen to two, health and security officials said Monday. Another 89 were injured in the clashes outside Cairo's main Coptic cathedral, which brought Egypt's growing religious tension to the seat of the church's pope. The clashes broke out following the funeral of four Christians killed in sectarian violence the day before. A Muslim was also killed in that violence in Khossoos, a town just north of Cairo. The two incidents together constitute the country's deadliest sectarian violence in months. Witnesses say that the fighting escalated out of a street brawl that broke out when Coptic activists tried to stop traffic to stage an anti-government march. A mob, described by witnesses as residents of the area, pelted them with rocks and firebombs and fired birdshot, forcing them back inside the complex. At first, few police were present. By the time police arrived in larger numbers, the church itself had become the scene of violence, between Christians barricaded inside and the mob outside, with the two sides exchanging rocks and firebombs. Police fired tear gas, and gas canisters landing inside church grounds caused a panic among women and children. People outside the church cheered. Some firebombs thrown from near the church landed at a nearby gas station, while witnesses said some in the church lobbed firebombs at the crowd outside. Health Ministry official Khaled el-Khateib said that the identity of the second fatality was not immediately known. A security official said the death occurred during the clashes at the cathedral. The first fatality was Christian. Clashes between angry Coptic Christian residents and police also erupted late Sunday outside the local church in the town of Khossoos, leaving at least 12 people and one police officer injured. During the funeral service, mourners chanted against Islamist President Mohammed Mursi, calling on him to step down. Mursi condemned the violence, saying he considered any attack on the cathedral as an attack against him personally. He ordered an immediate investigation into the violence. Police said they have arrested four implicated in the violence, but didn't provide details. Many of the Coptic Christians who took cover in the cathedral blamed the police for failing to protect them or stop the attacks on the church, citing little deployment outside the church at a politically charged funeral. They also blame the police for lobbing tear gas inside the cathedral. The pope was not in the cathedral at the time of the siege, which lasted into the late hours of Sunday. The U.S. Embassy in Egypt said in a statement Monday said it welcomed Mursi's promise to conduct a full and transparent investigation and conveyed condolences to the victims of the violence. "It is the responsibility of the state to protect all of its citizens," the statement said. The violence outside the Cathedral coincided with the visit of the European Union's head of foreign policy, Catherine Ashton, to Egypt. In a statement issued late Sunday, Ashton said she was "extremely worried" about the clashes outside the cathedral. "On hearing the news I immediately contacted the Presidency, strongly urging restraint and for the security forces to control the situation. I understand the President has spoken with the Head of the Coptic Church and has condemned the violence. My thoughts are with the victims and their families," she said. The violence drew sharp criticism from the opposition, which has already been critical of Mursi's management of Egypt's transition. The National Salvation Front, the umbrella group that brings together a number of Egypt's liberal and largely secular opposition, said in a statement Monday that Mursi and the police bear the responsibility for the clashes, demanding an investigation into what it said were attempts to "ignite sedition." The Muslim Brotherhood's political party, the Freedom and Justice Party from which Mursi hails, also blamed "dubious" attempts by unnamed parties to broaden instability in Egypt by igniting sectarian violence and spreading chaos. Coptic Christians make up about 10 percent of Egypt's estimated 84 million people. Copts have complained for decades that the Christian minority suffers from discrimination, and recurrent localized violence over issues of building houses of worship or inter-