

Friday, 26 April 2013

Muslim-Christian romance fuels Egypt sectarian row



An Egyptian security official and a priest say police fired tear gas and clashed with a stone-throwing mob of Muslims who had surrounded a Coptic Church in anger over an inter-faith romance. The Muslim protesters accuse the church of helping to secret away 21-year-old Rana el-Shazli, believed to have converted to Christianity before fleeing her small town with a Coptic Christian man to Turkey. The alleged romance ignited sectarian tension in Wasta, a rural town in Beni Suef province, about 95 kilometers (60 miles) south of Cairo. Clashes flared anew on Friday after weekly Muslim prayers. For more than a month, Muslims have attacked churches over the incident and forced Christians to close their shops in the town. Christians make up nearly 10 percent of Egypt's population of 90 million.

Meanwhile, Coptic Pope Tawadros II said Egypt's Christians feel sidelined, ignored and neglected by Muslim Brotherhood-led authorities, who proffer assurances but have taken little or no action to protect them from violence.

In his first interview since emerging from seclusion after eight people were killed in sectarian violence between Muslims and Christians this month, the pope called official accounts of clashes at Cairo's Coptic cathedral on April 7 "a pack of lies".

He also voiced dismay at attempts by President Mohamed Mursi's Islamist allies to purge thousands of judges appointed under ousted President Hosni Mubarak, saying the judiciary was a pillar of Egyptian society and should not be touched.

"There is a sense of marginalization and rejection, which we can call social isolation," the pope told Reuters on Thursday of the feelings of Christians, who he said make up at least 15 percent of Egypt's 84 million people. Most Egyptians are Sunni Muslims.

Attacks on churches and sectarian tensions increased significantly after the rise of Islamists to power following the 2011 uprising that overthrew Mubarak, even though Christians had demonstrated

Asked about the government's response to this month's attacks, he said: "It made a bad judgment and it was negligent... I would have expected better security for the place and the people."