

CHRISTIAN FAMILIES IN EGYPT FLEE ISLAMIC STATE HIT LISTS

ISMAILIA, Egypt: When Islamic State militants began circulating names of Christians who must leave their Egyptian hometown of Arish or die, Munir Munir's father Adel, a civil servant, brought home a hit list that had his own name as number two. The first person on the list, shopkeeper Wael Youssef, was killed on Jan 30. The Munirs barricaded themselves inside their house "like rats in a hole," Munir Munir recalled last week.

Within a month, four more Christians in the town had been shot dead, one beheaded and another burned to death. After the seventh killing, the Munirs finally fled. Their father insisted on staying behind. A shift in Islamic State's tactics from attacking soldiers and police to targeting Christian civilians has become a potential turning point in a country trying to halt a provincial insurgency from spiraling into wider sectarian bloodshed.

Islamic State's branch in Egypt, which has waged a low-level conflict for years by attacking security forces mostly in the Munirs' native North Sinai province, has issued a new message inciting attacks on Christians across Egypt. The militants' aim, say analysts, is to weaken President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi by sowing the kind of sectarian chaos that has fuelled lengthy conflicts in Iraq and Syria. During the killing wave of the past month, about 145 families have fled North Sinai to Ismailia, a city on the edge of the Suez Canal that forms the western boundary of Sinai, and about 30 to Cairo.

Others have made their way to other provinces, church officials and human rights groups say. Several families, including the Munirs, told Reuters that Muslim neighbors unaffiliated to Islamic State have stepped up assaults against them, emboldened by the militants and the violence that has destabilized their province and seen hundreds of soldiers and police killed in recent years.

"Our neighbors took our land because we are Christian. They tried to attack me and my sister and when my father came to defend us they sprayed his face with acid," said Munir Munir's sister Dimiana as she huddled with four family members in a churchyard, waiting for volunteers to find them a new home. The families gathered forlornly at Ismailia's Evangelical Church around sacks over spilling with the clothes they managed to bring before they fled. Women wailed over lost homes and children ran around oblivious as volunteers brought in blankets and made calls seeking to secure shelter.

Killed for being Christians

Copts comprise about 10 percent of Egypt's 90 million people, the biggest Christian minority in the Middle East. The violence is unlike previous waves of sectarian attacks in Egypt, because there is no longer any pretence of a reason, beyond killing Christians for their faith, said Ishak Ibrahim, researcher at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. "What we are seeing here is new. There has always been violence against Christians but it was usually for a 'reason' like land disputes. Now Christians are killed just for being Christians," he said.

"Militants are sending the government a message; saying they can change part of the country's demographics. This is a dangerous precedent," he said. "...And who knows if it will be replicated in Upper Egypt or elsewhere." Sameh Kamel had just made it out of the North Sinai with his wife and two children when his neighbour phoned. Islamic State militants had come knocking on their door just an hour after the family had packed their bags and fled. "They're knocking on doors and if they find a Christian they kill him," said Kamel.

The opening salvo came in December, when an Islamic State fighter bombed a church adjoining Cairo's St Mark's Cathedral, the seat of the Coptic papacy, killing 28 people. The militants threatened all Egyptian Christians in a video in February. The flight of the North Sinai Coptic families poses a challenge for Sisi, who promised to restore security in a US ally seen as a bulwark against extremism. Sisi, who's ouster of Islamist President Mohamed Mursi in 2013 sparked an escalation in the Sinai insurgency, has sought to assure Egyptians that security forces would preserve national unity. He ordered the government to help resettle displaced Christians and met with top officials to discuss how to respond. — Reuters



PALMYRA: In this file photo, Russian soldiers stand on a road as smoke rises from a controlled land mine detonation by Russian experts inside the ancient town of Palmyra, Syria in the central Homs province. —AP

SYRIAN TROOPS CLEAR EXPLOSIVES AFTER TAKING PALMYRA FROM IS

DAMASCUS: Syrian army units were clearing land mines and explosives left behind by Islamic State militants in the historic town of Palmyra yesterday, a day after government troops and allied militiamen recaptured it from the extremists, a Syrian security official said. The military expects the process to be long and difficult due to the large number of mines planted by IS, he said, speaking on condition of anonymity in line with regulations. Syrian troops fully recaptured Palmyra on Thursday after a push that saw the militants' defenses crumble and IS fighters flee in the face of artillery fire and intense Russia-backed airstrikes.

It's the third time the town - famed for its priceless Roman ruins and archaeological treasures IS had sought to destroy - has changed hands in one year. The Syrian government seized the town from Islamic State militants last

March, only to lose it again 10 months later. Last spring, it took Russian demining experts weeks to clear the town from hundreds of mines planted by IS. Before the civil war gripped Syria in 2011, Palmyra was a top tourist attraction, drawing tens of thousands of visitors each year.

Syrian state television broadcast footage showing troops near the town's archaeological site, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the historic citadel yesterday. Archeologists have decried what they say is extensive damage to Palmyra's treasured ruins. Drone footage released by Russia's Defense Ministry last month showed new damage IS had inflicted to the facade of Palmyra's Roman-era theater and the adjoining Tetrastyle - a set of four monuments with four columns each at the center of the colonnaded road leading to the theater.

The Islamic State group has destroyed scores of ancient sites across its self-styled Islamic caliphate in Syria and Iraq, viewing them as monuments to idolatry. Maamoun Abdu-Karim, the head of the Antiquities and Museums Department in Syria, told The Associated Press on Thursday night that this time around, the damage to the ruins seemed less in magnitude. "We had expected the worst. However, the damage, according to the available photos, appears limited," he said.

But the Islamic State group is not the only side in Syria's civil war, now in its sixth year that has damaged Palmyra.

A 2014 report by a UN research agency disclosed satellite evidence of looting while the ruins were under Syrian military control. Opposition fighters have also admitted to looting the antiquities for funds.—AP



NABI SALEH: Palestinian protesters block the door of an Israeli forces' armored car in the occupied West Bank village of Nabi Saleh, near the city of Ramallah yesterday. —AFP

PALESTINIANS CLASH WITH SETTLERS IN WEST BANK

NABI SALEH: Palestinians clashed with Israeli settlers yesterday near the city of Ramallah in the occupied West Bank, an AFP photographer said. Fighting broke out near a water source for the Palestinian village of Nabi Saleh, and residents of the Halamish settlement fired gunshots into the air. An Israeli army spokeswoman said she was unable to provide comment.

Nabi Saleh has for years been a flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Each Friday, Palestinians, foreigners and some Israelis protest in Nabi Saleh against the expansion of the nearby Halamish settlement.

In August 2015, pictures of an armed Israeli soldier in Nabi Saleh pinning down a crying Palestinian boy against a rock went viral on social media and made international headlines.—AFP