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EGYPT | Extremist Murders Orthodox Priest

A 50 year-old Coptic Orthodox priest from Upper Egypt was stabbed to death, and another was wounded, by a suspected extremist on Oct. 12. Father Samaan Shahata Rizkallah was chased and stabbed repeatedly in the head, neck and abdomen by a man wielding a meat cleaver, who also imprinted a cross on his forehead. An ambulance arrived at the scene an hour later, and transported him to a hospital, where he died. Father Beymen Mofteh of El-Malak Church in Matay, who was with Father Samaan, was also attacked but reportedly survived his injuries.

A suspect is reportedly in custody. In a statement, Bishop Astafanous of Fashn, Biba and Samasta described the alleged killer as an "extremist" with a criminal record, naming him as Ahmed-El Sonbaty.

Father Samaan served at St. Julius' church in Ezbet Girgis, al-Fashn, Beni Suef governorate, a village that is home for approximately 3,000 inhabitants, 2,000 of whom are Christians.

In 2009, Father Samaan applied for a permit to construct a new church on land owned by Christians who had offered to demolish their old homes, prompting protests from the Muslim community. The church was eventually built. In September 2015, Father Samaan was arrested briefly and interrogated by the police after performing much-needed renovations on the church.

Attacks on Egypt's Christian community have surged in recent months, with over 100 deaths since December 2016 in a series of attacks that have been claimed by the Islamic State (IS, Daesh). Most recently, on Oct. 5, police reportedly defused an IED found in a car close to Al-Masara Church in Rod El-Farag, Cairo.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We extend our deepest condolences to the family of Father Samaan, to his community and to his church. While we recognize the efforts of the Egyptian government to combat extremism, we encourage it to consider longer-term security arrangements to guarantee the safety of all civilians, and especially religious minorities, who are particularly vulnerable to extremists' attacks. It is vital that the inordinate delay between the attack and the arrival of the ambulance is investigated, as this may have had a bearing on Father Samaan's demise. It is also very important in this context that the government removes all remaining obstacles to the construction and renovation of churches to ensure that such legitimate and peaceful activities no longer serve as excuses for harassment or attacks on Christian communities, and that all incidents involving sectarian violence are addressed in a court of law as opposed to through customary reconciliation sessions."