

Church bombing in Egypt causes anguish, anxiety

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The New Year's Day suicide bombing outside a Coptic Christian church in Alexandria, which killed at least 25 people and injured dozens more, brought tightened security measures from Egyptian authorities, who blamed foreigners, and heightened fears among the minority Christian population.

The Coptic leadership called the bombing outside a church in the seaport city "a grave escalation" of violence against Egypt's Coptic Christians, who make up an estimated 10 percent of the population, and "a result of the current sectarian tensions between Muslims and Copts that recently erupted due to the spread of lies about the church and its symbols."

Church officials have complained that authorities repeatedly block new church construction or building improvements and that Christians suffer discrimination. The attack was said to be the deadliest in ten years against the dwindling Copt communities.

The Muslim governments of Iran and Saudi Arabia condemned the blast as did U.S. groups such as the Muslim Public Affairs Council. "We as Muslim Americans are horrified, along with Christians and all people of faith, by this atrocious act," said an MPAC official.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his New Year's speech at the Vatican, demanded that governments do more to protect Christians. Christmas Eve assaults by Muslim extremists killed dozens of Christians in two Nigerian cities. Iraq's Christians, many of whom have fled Baghdad and other cities, have been targets of attack and intimidation by local branches of al-Qaeda.

The senior Muslim cleric in Egypt, Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, accused the pope of interfering in the nation's internal affairs. But a joint news conference held by Muslim and Coptic clergy urged Egyptians not to allow the attack to exacerbate tensions. An Associated Press photo taken of a New Year's protest crowd in Egypt

showed a group of Muslims and Copts holding aloft the two faiths' holy books and religious symbols to demonstrate their shared anguish.