

# Villagers burn Baha'i homes in rural Egypt

Sect persecuted in Middle East since its founding

By **MAGGIE MICHAEL**  
*The Associated Press*

CAIRO - Dozens of Muslim villagers have attacked the homes of members of the minority Baha'i religion in southern Egypt, hurling firebombs and denouncing them as "enemies of God," human rights groups said Thursday.

The attacks began Saturday after a prominent Egyptian media commentator denounced a Baha'i activist in a television appearance as an "apostate" and called for her to be killed.

The Baha'i religion was founded in the 1860s by a Persian nobleman, Baha'u'llah, whom the faithful regard as the most recent in a line of prophets that included Buddha, Abraham, Jesus and Muhammad. Muslims reject the faith because they believe Muhammad was God's final prophet, and Baha'is have

been persecuted in the Middle East.

In Egypt, where the majority of the country's nearly 80 million people are Sunni Muslim, the Baha'i faith is not recognized as an official religion. The head of Al-Azhar, Egypt's dominant religious authority, has also declared it a "sacrilegious dogma."

After five days of violence, calm returned Wednesday to the village of Shouraniya, about 215 miles south of Cairo. No one was injured.

The village's 15 Baha'i residents were forced to leave, and police have prevented them from returning, rights groups said.

Egypt's Interior Ministry confirmed the attacks and said police have made arrests. But it denied that police stopped the Baha'i residents from returning to their village.

"This is just an incident, and we are investigating," ministry spokesman Gen. Hamdi Abdel-Karim said. He declined to provide more details.