

Explosion in Egypt church during Palm Sunday prayers kills at least 21

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Cairo: At least 21 people were killed and 40 others injured today when a powerful bomb exploded in a church north of Cairo that was packed with Palm Sunday worshippers.

The explosion took place in Mar Gerges Coptic church in the Egyptian Nile delta city of Tanta, about 120 kilometres from Cairo, an under secretary of Health Ministry in Gharbiya governorate said.

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has ordered the opening of military hospitals to receive the injured.

At least 21 people have been killed and 40 others injured, an official said, adding that 26 ambulances were sent to the spot.

Death toll is expected to rise, officials said. Sources said that the explosion took place inside the Mar Gerges Coptic Church.

The primary investigations suggest that a person put an explosive device inside the church during the Christian prayers celebrating the Palm Sunday, the sources said.

Palm Sunday falls on Sunday before the Easter. The feast commemorates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, an event mentioned in each of the four canonical Gospels.

No one immediately claimed the attack.

CBC TV showed footage from inside the church, where a large number of people gathered around what appeared to be lifeless, bloody bodies covered with papers. Magdi Awad, the head of the provincial ambulance service, confirmed the toll.

The attack in Tanta was the latest in a series of assaults on Egypt's Christian minority, which makes up around 10 percent of its 85 million population and has been repeatedly targeted by Islamic extremists. It comes just weeks before Pope Francis is due to visit Egypt.

Egypt has seen a wave of attacks by militants since 2013 when the military overthrew president Mohammed Morsi, an elected leader who hailed from the Muslim Brotherhood, and launched a crackdown against Islamists.

A local Islamic State affiliate claimed a suicide bombing at a church in Cairo in December that killed around 30 people, mostly women, as well as a string of killings in the restive Sinai Peninsula that caused hundreds of Christians to flee to safer areas of the country.

A militant group called Liwa al-Thawra claimed responsibility for an April 1 bomb attack targeting a police training center in Tanta, which wounded 16 people. The group, believed to be linked to the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, has mainly targeted security forces and distanced itself from attacks on Christians.

- (With agencies)