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Twenty Christians have been killed in clashes between Christians and Muslims in Egypt, according to the interior ministry.

The fighting began in the village of Kusheh, about 440km (275 miles) south of Cairo.

But Bishop Wissa, from the neighbouring village of Balyana, told the BBC that the looting and burning of Christian homes and shops had spread to four other villages by Monday.

Kusheh has been sealed off, and the authorities say the situation is now under control.

BBC Cairo correspondent Caroline Hawley says the fighting represents the most serious outbreak of communal violence in the area for several months.

It broke out during a financial dispute between Muslim and Coptic Christian businessmen Kusheh. The violence then spread to neighbouring villages.

The Bishop said "barbaric people carrying rifles went on a rampage and started firing at Christian shops and Christian houses" after church services on Sunday.

Christian businesses targeted

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▪ The BBC's
Caroline Hawley
in Cairo
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Witnesses in the village said scores of Christian-owned shops and offices had been destroyed in the violence.

They said security forces had opened fire in an effort to disperse the protesters, some of whom had fired back.

Some reports say that one of those killed was Rashed Fahim, a Christian fabric trader whose dispute with a Muslim villager over a business deal sparked the initial violence last Wednesday.

The authorities imposed a curfew to bring the initial violence under control, but fighting flared up again when the curfew was eased at the weekend.

History of tension

Kosheh last came to international attention in 1998, when an Egyptian human rights group accused police of arresting hundreds of Christian villagers and torturing some of them during an investigation into the murder of two Christians.

The group believes the police were trying to find a Christian, rather than Muslim, culprit to avoid inflaming tensions between the two communities.

Relations between Egypt's Muslims and its Christian minority are extremely delicate.

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