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Unrest was first reported on March 2 and has since killed at least one Christian, wounded several others, left personal property destroyed and displaced thousands of Christians, reports indicate.

"The level of destruction is not fully and clearly confirmed," said Tamire Shaemalo, Communication director for the Adventist Church in Ethiopia, citing inconsistencies between reports.

Preliminary reports, however, indicate that dozens of Adventist homes were burned alongside the churches, members were robbed and food and farm animals were destroyed during the attacks, Shaemalo said. Church officials in Central Ethiopia estimate a total loss of more than 5 million birr (about US$30,000) in church property, including burned tithes and offerings, he added.

Some reports indicate the violence erupted in response to recent border skirmishes, in which Ethiopian soldiers sought to deter Muslim extremists. Others said the attacks were provoked when a Christian allegedly desecrated a copy of the Quran.

Police in Ethiopia yesterday arrested 130 religious extremists linked to the violence, Voice of America reported.

The attacks have ignited tensions in a region known for longstanding harmony between Muslim and Christians, church religious liberty advocates said.

"We are deeply troubled by what has happened in Ethiopia, where relations among religions have been relatively peaceful," said John Graz, director of the Adventist world church's department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty.

"We hope that these incidents will not incite further violence in the region, and we encourage people of all faiths who stand for peace and religious freedom to work toward reconciliation," Graz added.

Ethiopia is about 60 percent Christian and 40 percent Muslim, census reports indicate. Approximately 170,000 Adventists worship in more than 800 churches across the country.

The Adventist Church in Ethiopia will send six church officials to join representatives from five other faith communities later this week at the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, which is expected to survey the situation, Shaemalo said.