

Muslim-Christian Conflict in Nigeria Claims Thousands of Lives

Christian ministries are offering humanitarian assistance for the victims of what many believers say is a Muslim-led holy war

Like the eye of a storm, an uneasy calm has settled over northern Nigeria in the wake of religious violence that has claimed thousands of lives. But Christian observers fear that without intervention, Nigeria could become another Sudan, where 2 million Christians died in a religious conflict that spanned two decades.

Christians comprise nearly half of Nigeria's 139 million people. Many of the country's 36 states, including the recently troubled Plateau state, are predominantly Christian though others, such as Kaduna state, have large Muslim populations.

Though Nigerian Christians and Muslims have lived in peace for decades, the communities recently have become more polarized. In 2000, for example, 12 northern states imposed Sharia law, the Islamic legal code.

Moreover, religious violence has steadily increased in the last few years. According to Compass Direct, a Christian news service that highlights religious persecution, violence in the last three years has claimed at least 10,000 lives. More than 300 churches have been destroyed and at least 10 pastors and their families killed.

Nigeria has sustained millions of dollars in property damage, and hundreds of thousands have been displaced. In May President Olusegun Obasanjo declared a state of emergency in Plateau state after nearly 1,000 people died in interreligious violence. But the fighting has continued.

A May 11 rally in Kano state—protesting violence against Muslims—turned into a riot. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), based in Kano, put the death toll at 3,000 believers, including three pastors.

Meanwhile, coordinated attacks by Muslim militia in the Quanpan area and in Langtang have left dozens dead and thousands displaced. On June 9, violent clashes between Muslims and Christians in Numan killed at least nine people and destroyed several places of worship.

Some reports attribute the violence to land disputes between Christian farmers and Muslim herders. Others speculate that opportunistic leaders are instigating the violence in order to cement a power base within their respective communities.

Local Christians, meanwhile, say the true motive behind the violence is jihad, or a Muslim holy war. With the recent 200th anniversary of the Sokoto caliphate, established by a Muslim leader who Islamized much of northern Nigeria, they are concerned that militant Muslims are using violence to restore Islamic rule to a nation that has received international attention for a Christian revival.

“The ultimate aim ... is to Islamize the entire country,” said a CAN leader and pastor in Kano state who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisal. “They are trying everything

to take over the Plateau state in the form of jihad.”

Nigeria’s desperate situation has not gone unnoticed by international leaders. David Alton, an independent member of the House of Lords and co-founder of the human-rights group Jubilee Campaign, recently contacted President Obasanjo. Alton said the president told him that his government “has zero tolerance for any acts that have the potential of threatening the nation’s peace and stability.”

Obasanjo, a Christian who in 1998 became the nation’s first democratically elected president after 15 years of military rule, also called for international help in dealing with what he called “the consequences of decades of misrule and structural as well as systematic dislocation.”

“We should do all we can to support this ... approach,” Alton said. “If we fail, then Nigeria could easily suffer the same fate as Sudan, where 2 million died in two decades and where Christian communities have led terrorized lives.”

Christian leaders in Nigeria reiterate the call for support. “We need to speak out and warn people that terrorism is everywhere, not only in the Middle East,” the CAN leader told Charisma. “We have people ready to pay the price [for evangelism] and are not afraid, but we need international support.”

Many Christian groups are already responding to the crisis. Texas-based Gospel Revival Ministries (GRM) has long supported indigenous pastors. Now, in addition to the support it sends for pastoral salaries and training, the ministry has begun coordinating relief efforts. Area churches provide

humanitarian aid and religious materials.

“We feel blessed to be able to aid the church in Nigeria,” said John Musser, president of GRM (). “Their response to the daily threat of violence has been humbling. This is a people who understands that the only way to achieve reconciliation is to reach out with the gospel, in love.”

David Mundy