

Christian Leaders in Nigeria Call Bauchi Violence Premeditated

✖ Christian leaders in Bauchi state said religious violence here sparked by a row over a billiards table on Jan. 27 bore signs that Muslim extremists were prepared for a large-scale slaughter of Christians.

Initially authorities said only 18 people were killed after sectarian violence erupted in the areas of Tafawa Balewa and Bogoro, where there are large Christian populations in predominantly Muslim Bauchi state in northern Nigeria. Since then, estimates have ranged wildly from 25 to 96 people killed over a three-day period starting Jan. 27, with Christian leaders asserting that Muslim extremists used the billiards table incident as a pretext for unleashing attacks with a stockpile of weapons hidden in mosques.

As early as Feb. 1, Bauchi Commissioner of Police Mohammed Indabawa said at a press conference that 25 bodies had been recovered in a joint security operation in Tafawa Balewa and Bogoro, with 38 people arrested. Shortly thereafter, a local legislator in the Bauchi House of Assembly, Aminu Tukur, told journalists that 31 bodies had been recovered and were buried in the area.

Subsequently Luka Chongda, chairman of the Sayawa Development Association, a community Non-Governmental Organization in Tafawa Balewa, reportedly said 96 people had died in the violence. He cited data collated from affected areas in both Bogoro and Tafawa Balewa four days after the Jan. 27 incident.

Christian leaders in Tafawa Balewa told Compass that the triggering incident – in which a Muslim was said to have burned a billiards table belonging to a Christian, prompting

youths from Christian families to burn mosques and Muslim homes – led to the emergence of Muslim weapons caches and Islamist mercenaries. Islamists had made preparations for attacks in the areas with large Christian populations, the Christian leaders said, and were awaiting a pretext for carrying them out.

The Rev. Ibrahim Ezekiel of the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN) in Tafawa Balewa told Compass that Muslims in Bauchi state have tried to eliminate the Christian communities in Tafawa Balewa and Bogoro since violence first erupted in 1991.

“The Muslims have been attacking us, and the government of Bauchi state knows this,” Ezekiel said. “Yet the government has given these Muslims the backing to attack us. They want to exterminate the Christian communities here, and that is the reason they are supporting the attacks on us.”

Ezekiel, pastor of a COCIN congregation in Maryam, a suburb of Tafawa Balewa, said that area Muslims “used a lot of weapons to attack our people” that were stockpiled in mosques. Apart from the use of guns and other weapons to attack Christians, Ezekiel said area Islamists brought in Muslim mercenaries.

“They brought in mercenaries to attack us,” he said. “They label Christians here as infidels who must be dealt with. The Muslims are the aggressors – they killed our people and burned their houses. Christians who were helpless had no choice than to fight back and defend their families.”

Armed Muslims as young as 15 years old shot Christians they encountered, Ezekiel said. Christian youths seeking revenge for the billiards table incident stoked the violence until security forces could contain them and their Muslim counterparts; the pastor said 47 Christians have been arrested, with 27 of them charged.

The violence that erupted in the only two local council areas with large Christian populations in Bauchi state led to

significant property destruction that is as yet unknown in monetary terms. In addition, according to community leader Chongda, the violence displaced 800 families, with many of those yet to return.

Among Christians in Tafawa Balewa whose bodies have been recovered and buried are Pastor Bitrus Dangana of the Evangelical Church Winning All; Haruna Ayuba; Dima Apollos; Promise Isaac; Mama Likita Dadi; and Irimiya Mainama. Also killed were Christians identified only as Emmanuel in the Sabon Layi area of Tafawa Balewa; Godiya; and Gambo, a butcher in Maryam.

Abubakar Adamu, an official of the Red Cross Society in Bauchi, confirmed that the incident had displaced about 5,000 persons. The Red Cross was treating many of the wounded and burned, he said.

Ramat Kure of Maryam village told Compass that the violence in Tafawa Balewa was the fourth outbreak since 1991.

"The religious crisis in the area has remained unresolved because the Christian community is being oppressed by Muslims in the state," he said. "The incessant religious conflicts in the area are as a result of deliberate policy of marginalization and persecution targeted at Christians by the Muslim political leaders in the state."

Kure said he witnessed the killing of 10 Christians in Tafawa Balewa on Jan. 27.

Areas hit by the violence were Angwan Sarki village, Angwan Madaki, Arewa, Sabon Layi, and Bauchi-Dass Road. Muslims reportedly barricaded the Bauchi Dass Highway, pulling dozens of Christians from their vehicles and killing them.

Pastor Yunnana Yusuf of the COCIN Centre in Tafawa Balewa said he was in his home within the church compound on Jan. 27 when he heard shouting around the market square.

"I came out only to see people throwing stones at each other and, on inquiring, I was told that there was a fight going on between Muslims and Christians," he told Compass. "In no time, I heard gunshots. As I came out, I saw one Alhaji Maigida and another Muslim by the name of Alhaji Maishayi, about a hundred meters away, distributing guns to some Muslims, and they began shooting. Instantly, I saw three Christians being shot. It was this that triggered the incident, and within a short time, the entire town and surrounding villages were attacked and razed by Muslim attackers."

The dispute between the Muslim billiards player and the Christian pool table owner was reportedly settled by mediation of area elders on Jan. 26, but Muslims later burned the table, prompting Christian youths to burn 50 houses and five mosques, according to police commissioner Indabawa.