

4 Killed as Islamists Burn Down Churches Over 'Charlie Hebdo' Cartoons

At least five churches in southeastern Niger were ransacked and burned down Friday by hundreds of Islamist demonstrators angered by a cartoon published by the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*.

According to local sources contacted by *World Watch Monitor*, hundreds of people marched violently around 1:30 PM, shortly after Friday prayers. Shouting "Allah Akbar"—God is great—they attacked and set fire on most of the churches in the southeastern city of Zinder, about 1000 km, from Niamey, the capital of Niger.

The protesters, believed to be mainly youngsters, looted and ransacked several properties or shops belonging to members of Christian community in different parts of the city.

Several public buildings and properties were also set afire, among them the French cultural centre, the headquarters of the ruling party and several bars. Security forces fired tear gas in an attempt to restore order.

"We have never seen that before in Zinder," a local source told AFP. "It's Black Friday," he lamented.

According to local sources, 4 people were killed, among them a member of the security force caught up by the protesters.

The President of Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou, attended the Paris anti-terror march on Jan. 11, along with the Archbishop of Niamey, Mgr. Michel Cartatéguy and the Head of the Islamic Council of Niger.

Even so, the government has condemned the latest *Charlie Hebdo*

illustration, which depicts a weeping prophet Mohammad, and has banned publication of the satirical magazine in Niger.

Niger is a secular country known for a peaceful relation among religious communities. The vast majority of its 17 million inhabitants are Muslim.

Nevertheless, the country has witnessed the emergence of radical Islamist groups since the advent of democratic pluralism in the 1990s, and the Christian minority is often targeted by Islamists.

In September 2012, three churches were ransacked in the same city of Zinder, following a demonstration over the U.S. film *The Innocence of the Muslims*. The three churches damaged are the main Catholic cathedral and two evangelical churches.

Similar attacks targeting Christian properties took place in the southern city of Maradi, near the Nigerian border, in 1998 and 2000.

Located in West Africa, Niger is facing a growing Islamist threat notably by the Nigerian radical group Boko Haram in the south and other groups linked to Al-Qaida, such as AQIM and Mujao, which are active in Niger's western neighbor, Mali, and northern neighbor, Libya.

In a recent interview, Issoufou said international military intervention is needed in Libya to try to restore stability, and prevent a spillover across the region.

More than 500 Niger soldiers are deployed in Northern Mali under the banner of a U.N. peacekeeping mission.