

Anti-Christian Violence Creates Brutal Foothold

While the brutality of the so-called Islamic State has concentrated world attention on Iraq and Syria, lesser-noticed movements inspired by IS are taking root far from the Middle East.

In central Africa, a brutal militant Islamic group has embedded itself in the eastern extremes of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Muslim Defense International (MDI)—formerly known as the Alliance of Democratic Forces—has become embedded in the region and is attempting to rid the area of its Christians to create a foothold of Islam in the wider Lakes region.

The MDI has been repeatedly attacking the mostly Christian population in these parts of DRC for years. Kidnapping and murder are common. Although their successes ebb and flow, they continue to display surprising strength and have found a firm foothold where they can prepare for jihad into the Lakes Region, the heart of Africa.

Islamic militancy in Africa is part of a broader, global ideological current. Groups taking inspiration from IS have, over the past year, claimed the lives of thousands of Christians on the continent, holding Christians captive from Mali in the west to Somalia in the east.

Although mostly not as big and bold as IS, these groups are bolstered by their links to like-minded organizations inside and outside Africa.

What Is MDI?

The MDI is an alliance of Muslim forces who were allies of notorious Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. When Amin converted to

Islam, he attracted all kinds of Muslim groups to the area, including those with an ambition to Islamize the region. The MDI opposed former Ugandan President Milton Obote and current President Yoweri Museveni.

Nobody knows how many fighters they have, but despite the capture of their leader in April 2015, they still show surprising strength, according to a United Nations report. They operate from the Ruwenzori Mountains in the DRC, close to the Ugandan border.

How Do They Operate?

When they first arrived in the Ruwenzori Mountains in 1996, the rebels recruited local children by offering them free schooling and giving gifts to their parents. But over time they grew more brutal. In 2005, after an aggressive military campaign against them, they built hide-outs in inaccessible areas in the mountains. They intensified recruitment of local children and adults by offering free education and free pilgrimages. It was only after recruits arrived that they realized they had been taken to rebel hide-outs.

Later they simply kidnapped children and adults to resupply their ranks, and abducted women for sex and to produce children. Since the latest military campaign against them in 2014, they have massacred many villagers. The waves of violence have displaced tens of thousands of people, mostly Christians, who comprise more than 90 percent of the country's population.

What Is Their Agenda?

The MDI is alleged to have support from the Islamic government of Sudan, an assertion made by the Uganda government and backed by Western diplomatic sources. The group is accused of waging a proxy war for Sudan against Uganda as retribution for Uganda's support of secessionists who ultimately broke free into South Sudan.

The MDI is known to have attracted foreign recruits and to have forced Christians to convert to Islam. MDI is also rumored to have links with Somalia's al-Shabaab, Nigeria's Boko Haram and al-Qaida.

MDI camps are also believed to be offering training grounds for Islamist recruits from countries in equatorial Africa. Local sources told *World Watch Monitor* that their camps also serve as hide-outs for African jihadists when operations fail elsewhere. Some sources also alleged that the MDI camps are used to prepare fighters for jihad in Africa's Lakes Region.

Although the successes of MDI fluctuate, the group remains resilient because of its links with the local population through marriage, commerce and land, their excellent knowledge and use of the mountainous border region, as well as its religious fervor.

What Has Been the Impact on the Church?

The local population in the related area is overwhelmingly Christian (95.8 percent) and the impact on them has been immense.

"The persistent crisis is placing the church under immense pressure," said Arne Mulders, a researcher with Open Doors, a charity that supports Christians who live under pressure because of their faith. "They are struggling to cope with the displacement, trauma, loss of loved ones through murder or kidnapping, and the resulting economic difficulties. The economic impact has been so radical that many congregations have had to close down, unable to continue work in the absence of money coming in from members."

He said the atrocities committed have traumatized the population, especially women and young girls who have been abducted, raped and witnessed the brutal killing of family members. This resultant trauma is preventing them from coping with the challenges of daily life, he said.