

At Least 45 Christians Killed in Plateau State, Nigeria

Fulani Muslim herdsmen along with Muslim soldiers have killed at least 45 ethnic Berom Christians in Plateau state in the past week, Christians in this northern-central Nigerian town said.

Smaller attacks beginning on Nov. 20, reportedly over allegations by Fulani Muslims of cattle theft, preceded an attack on a Barkin Ladi church on Nov. 23 that killed four Christians, and an assault the next day left 35 Christians dead in Barkin Ladi and nearby Kwok village, according to area Christian leaders.

Church attendance was decimated as thousands of Christians have left the area.

“Christians are fleeing the town because we have no guns to fight back,” said one woman in a group of six Christians trying to leave Barkin Ladi. “Muslims have guns, and they have their soldiers fighting for them, so we have no choice but to leave town.”

Almost all churches in the town canceled or held reduced worship services on the first Sunday (Nov. 27) after the crisis was contained, as nearly all area Christians have fled to Jos or have left Plateau state, long hit by ethnic property conflicts fueled by anti-Christian sentiment. In March 2010 ethnic Berom Christians, who live as farmers, suffered attacks from Fulani nomads who graze their cattle on the Beroms’ land, resulting in hundreds of deaths in three villages near Jos.

In the attack on Thursday, the Fulani Muslims were shouting “*Allahu Akbar* [God is greater],” said farmer Choji Pamjamo, 51.

"On Thursday at about 9 a.m., the Muslims' call to prayer was made at the Izala [Islamic sect] mosque," Pamjamo said. "And shortly after that, we saw hundreds of armed Muslims invading the town from all directions, attacking and killing Christians. They were shouting '*Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar,*' as they were burning properties belonging to Christians."

Pamjamo confirmed Christian leaders' account of an attack on a Church of Christ of Nigeria (COCIN) congregation in the Sabon Layi (Rantya) area of Barkin Ladi the previous night (Nov. 23), saying that among the four Christians killed was Bible teacher Yakubu Pam.

David Gyang, 51, an elder at the COCIN Barkin Ladi church, said Muslims set off a religious crisis by attacking Christians at the church site on Wednesday night, Nov. 23, and then launching a major offensive the next morning.

"Some of the Christian victims in this attack that I know include a Christian police officer, one Mr. Bulus, who is the station officer of the Barkin Ladi police station," Gyang said. "He was inside his house on that day, and these Muslims broke the walls of his room and went inside to kill him and his son. A second Christian victim is Solomon Pam. He was attacked and had his hand broken."

Gyang lamented that Muslim soldiers brought to town to restore order joined their fellow Muslims in killing and maiming Christians.

"Muslim soldiers took sides with their fellow Muslims and were shooting and killing Christians," he said. "They also had soldiers guarding mosques in the town, but none was sent to watch over our churches, and that is the reason Muslims were able to burn the Baptist church in the town."

The COCIN church in Barkin Ladi had an average Sunday service attendance of about 1,200 people, but yesterday only 50 showed

up, he said.

"We could not go on with the worship but held a prayer meeting, and then our pastor left to Kwok village for the burial of the 26 killed there," he said.

Sources told Compass that along with the 26 Christians killed in Kwok village, nine others were killed in the attack on Barkin Ladi on Nov. 24. Compass found that the area attacks on Christians began Nov. 20, the day of the alleged cattle theft, with the killing of three Christians outside Barkin Ladi, and then two Christians in the town were killed on Nov. 21.

The next day, a Christian was beheaded behind a popular hotel in Barkin Ladi known as the White House, sources said. The attack on the COCIN church ensued the following evening.

Bitrus Davou and John David, two young Christian men who live near the church building, said they narrowly escaped death.

"Bullets fired at me by a Muslim soldier missed me and killed my dog," said Davou, 21.

David, also 21, said he and five friends were sitting in front of their house when a Muslim soldier appeared and began shooting at them.

"My friends ran inside the house, but I could not follow suit immediately as there was no route for me to run; so I jumped into an unfinished building beside my house," David said, pointing toward the bullet holes in the wall where he had taken refuge. "While there, the soldier spotted me and began shooting at me. It is a miracle that I escaped unhurt."

The Rev. Daniel Moses, pastor of the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA), said the violence was started by town Muslims who obtained massive support from Muslims from other parts of Barkin Ladi Local Government Area. Thousands of Christians have been displaced, he said.

"As of this morning [Sunday, Nov. 27] corpses of Christians killed are still being recovered, but we can confirm that 37 corpses have been recovered already, and even as I talk to you the burial of some of them is going on in the surrounding Christian villages," Moses said.

Emmanuel Kyesmen, secretary of ECWA congregation, said the government has been slow to address security concerns.

"Alhaji Kasimu, one of leaders of the Muslim community in Barkin Ladi, is responsible for arming Muslims to attack Christians—we all know this, and the attention of security agencies have been called to his activities, but no one seems to take the necessary steps to check him," Kyesmen said. "It appears the man is above the law."

The Barkin Ladi ECWA church, whose regular worship service usually attracts about 270 people, was a ghost of itself on Sunday, with only 42 members able to muster the courage to show up. The service lasted no more than 15 minutes, as they only prayed and left.

Kyesmen told Compass that 11 members of the church had their houses set ablaze by Muslims.

"As a church, we have become targets of attacks," Kyesmen said. "Our pastors and members are being killed in Plateau state by Muslims, while thousands of others have become refugees in their fatherland. There is the urgent need for the Nigerian government to find a lasting solution to this problem."

Religious conflict has been growing in Plateau state since 2006, he said, with numerous investigating committees instituted to investigate and report on the immediate and deeper causes, he said.

"But the surprising thing is that none of these reports has been implemented, and no individual has been made to face the

wrath of the law,” Kyesmen said. “The government must have the courage to ensure that those causing these problems are prosecuted.”

Among the church buildings found locked on Sunday morning were St. Joseph’s Catholic Parish, St. Mark’s Anglican Church, ECWA Good News Church, COCIN Church Sabon Layi, Living Faith Church, and a host of other Pentecostal and charismatic churches. The few churches that opened for prayer, which lasted no longer than 15 minutes, included the ECWA church, the COCIN church, and the All Denomination Church at the police barracks.

David Alamba, 48, a technician whom Compass met near the town’s police station along with five Christian women who were trying to leave Barkin Ladi, said many churches in town have been closed as most Christians have fled.

“Most Christians who live in Muslim quarters like Sabon Layi, Angwan Hausawa, Angwan Kwano, Angwan Izala, and Angwan Katako areas have to get soldiers to accompany them before they get their few belongings to leave the town,” he said. “You have to pay the soldiers at least 2,000 naira (US\$12) before they escort you to your house to get a few belongings before you move out of the town.”

Alamba said Muslims have been moving into the farms belonging to Christians and are destroying crops.

“This is to chase us out of the town and make us homeless, and at the same time starve us to death, since we now have no food to eat,” he said.

Predominantly Christian areas affected by the attacks included Rantya Gwol, Anguwar Tasha, Gangare, and Hayin Asibiti, sources said.

Several people fleeing the town as Compass arrived asked, “When will the killings of Christians in Nigeria stop?”