

Boko Haram's Radical Christian Persecution Sparks International Debate

On Dec. 1, a group of Islamic radicals raided the village of Chibok in northeastern Nigeria. The group of radicals, armed with guns, machetes and explosives, moved through the predominately Christian part of the village and began chanting "Allahu Akbar," meaning "god is greatest." They broke into Christian houses and proceeded to slit the throats of 10 Christians including one pastor.

In a separate attack, three churches, along with a police station and an immigration and customs office, were burned down in Gamboru Ngala, another town in Nigeria's northern regions. Another large group of armed radicals overran security forces before setting fire to the buildings.

Many suspect that the Islamic extremist group Boko Haram is behind these attacks. "The men came in large numbers and went into homes ... which were carefully selected and slaughtered the people while shouting 'Allahu Akbar,'" a resident of Chibok told the *Botswana Gazette*. "Who else apart from **Boko Haram** members would go into homes and slit the throats of 10 people?" a local official asked the press.

A History of Violence

This is only the latest attack perpetrated by the Islamic extremist group. On Nov. 25, a twin suicide bomb attack at St. Andrew's Military Protestant Church showed the capability of Boko Haram's acts of terror. In that attack, not one, but two vehicles—a bus and a car—laden with explosives infiltrated the Armed Forces Command and Staff College in Jaji, located 20 miles outside of Kaduna City. Once both vehicles were in place, the bus rammed into the side of the church located on

the college's campus.

After penetrating the wall of the church, the bus detonated its deadly payload. Fortunately, no one was injured in this initial attack. After the first explosion, people raced to the scene to see how they could assist anyone who was injured. When many of the first responders had gathered at the first blast site, a car parked nearby exploded. Eleven people were killed in the second blast, and 30 others were wounded.

An International Debate

Since Boko Haram began its armed insurgency in Nigeria, more than 3,000 people have been murdered. So far the reaction to the violence perpetrated in Nigeria by Boko Haram is mixed. Christian groups both in Nigeria and the United States have called on the U.S. government to label the extremist group a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Designating Boko Haram an FTO is adamantly opposed by the Nigerian government.

According to the Nigerian government, the U.S. designating Boko Haram an FTO would be counterproductive in confronting the group. According to the Nigerian ambassador to the U.S., the FTO designation would be embarrassing for Nigeria as a nation. It would essentially say that Nigeria was incapable of handling Boko Haram and it needed the international community's help.

The Nigerian government also believes the designation would energize Boko Haram and its supporters. The FTO designation would inflate Boko Haram's international prestige, possibly bringing it to the attention of larger Islamic groups who would be willing and able to support them with funds, arms and training.

Finally, the designation, according to the Nigerian ambassador, could affect foreign direct investment in Nigeria. He argued that the U.S. would drive investment away from Nigeria because companies would be afraid to invest in an area

where there is an active terrorist organization. This would be especially problematic for Nigeria, which already has a struggling economy.

Leaders of the U.S. chapter of the Christian Association of Nigerians (CANAN) argued against these assertions by the Nigerian government. Based on research by the United Nations, terrorism is not a controlling factor when investors consider where to invest.

According to CANAN, *"Investors will go for profit wherever they can find it, even if it is in the mouth of a lion."* Because terrorism would not affect the Nigerian economy as much as the government claims, CANAN argues that it should not determine whether the U.S. designates Boko Haram an FT0.

CANAN claims the designation would affect Boko Haram's ability to get funds and arms from outside Nigeria's borders. Potential supporters would be concerned about the wider net of justice that the designation would create. With less funds and arms, Nigeria might be able to curtail Boko Haram's operational capabilities.

A Deadly Partnership

Whether or not the designation would ultimately decrease Boko Haram's **persecution of Christians** can still be debated. Recent developments may have rendered some of the Nigerian government's concerns over the designation moot. Earlier this month, a U.S. military report indicated that links between Boko Haram and **al-Qaida** have been established.

Al-Qaida has found a safe haven in Mali's northern regions after the government collapsed last year. According to U.S. Military Commander in Africa General Carter F. Ham, Boko Haram is receiving training, arms and financial support from al-Qaida. Will this be enough to tip the scales in the FT0 debate in the U.S.?

As the international community and the Nigerian government

continue to discuss how to confront Boko Haram, Christians in Nigeria continue to live in fear. Security checkpoints and metal detectors are being constructed at the entrances of churches in an attempt to avoid becoming victimized by the next attack by Boko Haram. Until confronted, Boko Haram, along with its al-Qaida affiliates, will continue **persecuting Christians** in Nigeria with impunity.

William Stark *is the regional manager for Africa with International Christian Concern.*