

Christian Communities Disappearing Near Nigeria

✖ In a village outside this Bauchi state town in predominantly Muslim northern Nigeria, what was once a Christian community has vanished.

Last March the Christian peasant farmers of Mdandi village, eight kilometers (five miles) northwest of the Government Girls Secondary School in Tafawa Balewa town, were busy harvesting crops and preparing for a new farming season.

On March 27 scores of armed, hard-line Islamists—avoiding the surrounding Muslim villages—descended on Mdandi, destroyed the Christians' homes and drove them out, former residents said.

The attack on Mdandi was preceded by an assault on Feb. 10, believed to have been the fall-out of violence rooted in Muslim and Christian youths fighting over a Muslim's Jan. 27 burning of a Christian's billiards table. Some Christians were injured in the Feb. 10 attack.

"On their first attack, we fought back, defending ourselves and our families," said Luka Zafi, pastor of the Church of Christ in Nigeria congregation in the village. "And not being able to force us out, they retreated. We had thought that we would not be attacked again. But you see, they left and returned the second time with more of them, and all armed with guns. We could not fight back since we do not have arms to fight them. We ran out of the village, and they destroyed our two church buildings and our houses."

Zafi, whose house was gutted in the March 27 attack, said his church building along with a Roman Catholic Church building were set ablaze. Area Christians are now living as displaced persons in Tafawa Balewa town, while some of his members have moved to the suburb of Nahuta village.

Prior to the attacks, Zafi's church had 50 members, he said; they are now scattered among various villages. A Compass visit to the village found Muslim Fulani nomads had taken it over and were using it to graze their cattle.

The marauders were believed to have been Islamists from other parts of Bauchi state collaborating with local Muslims and Fulani herdsmen. The Christians said they believe they were targeted, as the assailants bypassed surrounding Muslim communities.

Zafi lamented that three months after the attacks, the Christians have received no assistance from the state or federal governments.

"We appeal that they help resettle my people back in Mdandi village," he said. "The government can do this by assisting the community to rebuild their destroyed churches and houses."

One reason the government has been slow to check Islamist aggression is that neither officials nor Western news agencies question false claims that the ethnic Seyawa Christians steal the Fulani Muslim herdsmen's cattle, the supposed reason for the Fulani attacks, according to area Christians. They said many people are not aware that some local Christian farmers also own cattle and have never stolen them from the Muslim nomads.

Because the religious crisis in neighboring Plateau state has also been portrayed as communal property squabbles, the government has limited its response and many lives of Christians have been lost because of inaction, they said.

Zafi said the need for the government to halt the attacks of the Muslim militants in northern Nigeria was more important than restoring the Christians' property.

"Unless this is done, I am afraid, Christians in this part of the country may be on their way to extinction," he told

Compass.

Following the gutting of their church building, his congregation used the primary school in Nahuta village as their worship place, he said.

“But because we did not have houses to live in around there, we had to disperse to the various villages in search of abodes,” he said. “So the church members no longer meet to worship together.”

COCIN has reassigned Pastor Zafi to assist with another church in Nahuta village as an associate pastor.

Nigeria’s population of more than 158.2 million is divided between Christians, who make up 51.3 percent of the population and live mainly in the south, and Muslims, who account for 45 percent of the population and live mainly in the north. The percentages may be less, however, as those practicing indigenous religions may be as high as 10 percent of the total population, according to *Operation World*.

Neighboring Violence

Muslim extremists also attacked Gumel, another Christian village in Tafawa Balewa Local Government Area, in February—leaving two Christians dead, destroying three church buildings, burning more than 50 houses and displacing more than 300 residents, Christian leaders said.

Killed in the Feb. 5 attack was COCIN church elder Mallam Riga Ubandoma, they said. A 14-year-old girl, Numkwi William, died from a snake bite while fleeing from the assailants.

Residents have taken refuge in Tafawa Balewa town. Ishaya Magaji, 65, pastor of the displaced Gumel COCIN church, told Compass that the Muslim aggressors took them by surprise at 5 p.m. that day.

“They overpowered us, so we had to flee with our wives and

children,” Pastor Magaji said. “They burned our houses and destroyed our properties.”

Before the attack, Magaji said, his church had about 166 members; now all of them have been displaced. Magaji and his wife, Saratu, are living with their nine children at the house of other Christians until they receive help to find a new home.

“We cannot return to the village—not only because our houses have been destroyed, but because the Muslims have taken over the village and are using the place as a grazing field for the Fulani Muslims in the area,” Magaji said.

Besides the COCIN church building, the Muslim extremists also destroyed the buildings of a Roman Catholic parish and an Evangelical Church Winning All congregation. He said most of the villagers have been displaced to other towns and villages in Tafawa Balewa, including Rafin Ganba, Bwar, Mantokshin and Nahuta.

Bulus James, a Gumel village teacher, is among those displaced.

“I was in my house that evening when I heard gunshots all over,” James said. “I ran out of my house, only to see a large number of armed men shooting at our people, setting fire on houses and churches. I had no choice than to run into the bush, and that is how I survived the attack. Since then I have not gone to the village, because the Muslims have taken over the area.”

James, who now teaches at the COCIN Metropolitan School in Tafawa Balewa, estimated the number of raiders at about 200 and said they were carrying guns.

Magaji, saying the attack on the village was part of an extremist jihad (Islamic war) being waged against Christians in Bauchi state, said Muslims easily attacked the Christian

village because it is surrounded by the Muslim villages of Yamgar, Wurogara, Shafali and Sakom.

“We have lost all that we have and have nowhere to turn,” he said. “The government should help us by rebuilding our churches and homes so that we can all return to the village.”

Attempts by Compass to visit Gumel with Magaji were thwarted, as they were chased away by nomadic Muslim Fulani herdsmen who have taken over the village.