

Christian Vigilante Group Sparks Religious Riots in Central Nigeria

A Christian vigilante group killed a **Muslim** resident who insisted on going through their illegal checkpoint, triggering riots that have left at least four people dead in central Nigeria, a local official said Sunday, and showing how communities have lost faith in government's ability to protect them.

Rioters have burned down houses and shops in the remote area of Ibi, about 140 miles (230 kilometers) from the Taraba state capital of Jalingo, said Ibi local government chairman Isiaku Adamu.

Abubakar Abubakar Bello, an Ibi resident, told The Associated Press that churches and mosques were also torched as he stood outside his home to protect it. He said residents were fleeing his town.

A Taraba State government spokesman Emmanuel Bello said Sunday that authorities have sent troops to the area to quell the violence.

Christians had put up several checkpoints early Sunday to stop Muslims from nearing their church during their services as a response to church attacks in other parts of the country, Adamu said.

The ensuing riots come three weeks after a suicide bomber rammed an SUV loaded with explosives into a Catholic church holding Mass on Sunday in the north central city of Kaduna, killing at least seven people and wounding more than 100 others.

The car bombing was the latest high-casualty attack targeting churches in a West African nation of more than 160 million people evenly divided between Muslims and Christians. No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. However, a radical Islamist sect known as Boko Haram has previously targeted churches in a bid to exacerbate religious tensions in Nigeria.

In June, **Boko Haram** claimed responsibility for church attacks that occurred three weekends in a row in central and northern Nigeria. The trio of attacks triggered bloody reprisals, raising the toll to at least 50 deaths.

The most deadly attacks seem to have targeted Christian holidays: An Easter Day blast in Kaduna left at least 38 people dead, and a Christmas Day suicide bombing of a Catholic church near Nigeria's capital killed at least 44. Boko Haram claimed responsibility for both attacks.

That threat has prompted churches to boost their security, but Sunday's killing in Ibi is the first reported death blamed on Christian vigilante groups.

Boko Haram, which is held responsible for more than 730 deaths this year alone, according to an AP count, is also blamed for attacks targeting mosques, churches, schools, government buildings, phone masts and universities.

Copyright 2012 The Associated Press.