

Christians Targeted in Nigeria Election-Related Violence

Violence threatens next month's elections in Nigeria.

Already, political violence has been disruptive to church activities. Police have warned church goers that places of worship are targets, and they have made note of several attacks on believers within the last week.

On March 20, three would-be attackers in Jos were killed in a failed attempt to bomb the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) and the nearby Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN). The same day, a bomb planted at the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Church failed to detonate.

The bombing attempts were preceded by Muslim Fulani tribesmen attacks on March 10, where more than 4,000 people were displaced. In the Tafawa Balewa area, 463 homes, 11 shops, and 13 churches were burned.

There are also rumors that extremists are trying to create a state of emergency ahead of the Presidential elections. Todd Nettleton with Voice of the Martyrs says, "They're going to elect their National Assembly on April 2. They're going to elect their new President on April 9, and then on April 16 they will elect their State Assemblies and their State Governors." He adds that these reports are not unusual for the country: "It is a time of upheaval. At times in the past, that has meant trouble for Christians, and that's one of the things we're concerned about."

The violence has taken a clear sectarian overtone. Nettleton explains that "there is an element of religion that comes into some of this campaigning, particularly in the Muslim areas

where they say, 'Hey, we've had a Christian as the president for these last couple of years. It's time for a Muslim to be the president now.'"

Nigeria's 2011 presidential race is squaring three Muslims: General Muhammadu Buhari of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), Mallam Nuhu Ribadu of the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), and Ibrahim Shekarau of the All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP) against incumbent Goodluck Jonathan from the Christian south.

Officials say the bloodshed won't derail the polls. However, there's a difference between polls proceeding and a peaceful election, Nettleton notes: "It's hard for me to imagine that the violence will completely stop; however, we hope that the government and the authorities there will at least tamp it down and provide some protection for the people."

With so many attacks targeting ministries, churches, and believers, Nettleton goes on to say that the security issues could disrupt outreach. "It's a challenge for the Christians there who want to do ministry, who want to do outreach," Nettleton says. "Obviously, when everything is so polarized by the election and by the publicity surrounding the election, it is a difficult time for Christians to step forward and witness and be involved in ministry."

Pray for peace. "When attacks are happening and some of them seem to be targeting Christians and ministries, it is a difficult time for our Christian brothers and sisters in Nigeria," Nettleton says. "And it's an important time for us to be praying for them."