

Emotional Funeral Held for Murdered Nigerian Christians

Members of a church in Suleja, Niger state, on the northern outskirts of this Nigerian capital city, culminated a week of fasting and prayer on Sunday with a memorial service for three Christians killed in a bombing by an Islamist sect.

Muslim militants from the Boko Haram threw a bomb into the building of the All Christian Fellowship Mission church on July 10 as members were leaving a Sunday worship service, authorities said.

Church member Christopher Ogbu told Compass he lost his wife, Ifeanyiwa Justina Ogbu, in the explosion.

"I have now been transformed into a widower, as my wife has been killed here," Ogbu said.

At the funeral service for the three Christians that were killed, the Rev. William Okoye, general overseer of the church, lamented the lack of security in Nigeria. He urged the government to halt the violence that has ravaged the country this year before it is plunged into religious war.

He told Compass that he rushed to the church site when news of the explosion reached him.

"I got here to discover that indeed an explosion had occurred in my church here in Suleja," he said. "Two died here, while the third died in the hospital in Abuja."

Shortly after the church was bombed, he said, the church declared a week of fasting and prayer. Security authorities believe members of Boko Haram, which has declared a jihad on the government in a bid to impose a strict version of *Shariah* (Islamic law) on the country, threw a bomb onto church

premises the afternoon of July 10.

"We received a report about the explosion in this church, and we rushed here to discover that it is true the church has been bombed," Sanusi Lemu, assistant commissioner of police, told Compass. "We then brought in our men from the bomb disposal unit, who recovered the injured and those killed."

Church member Uche Alfred confirmed that the explosion occurred as members were leaving the Sunday service.

The explosion marks the third time this year that bombs have targeted institutions in Suleja, just outside the political heart of the nation. The first explosion occurred early in the year at the Suleja office of the Independent National Electoral Commission, killing more than 25 persons. A second bombing took place during a political party's rally, killing several persons, including elementary school children.

"We received a report on the explosion in this church, and we mobilized and got here," Ishaya Isa of the National Emergency Management Agency told Compass. "You can see for yourself that it is true, as we have evacuated those killed to the morgue."

Members of Boko Haram, or the Jama'atu ahlus Sunnah lid da'awati wal Jihad, have claimed responsibility for other church bombings and attacks. The extremist Islamic sect is reportedly expected to launch a terrorist offensive at the end of this month, the two-year anniversary of the death of Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf.

Nigerian security forces captured Yusuf on July 30, 2009, and the next day he was found dead under mysterious circumstances.

Boko Haram reportedly formalized links with al-Qaida of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) last year, prompting fears that Nigeria could see unprecedented large-scale terrorism, including suicide bombings. The government is reportedly expecting more than 100 jihadists trained in Sudan and Somalia to lead a

terrorist assault planned for the end of the month.

The jihadists, who reportedly received training from AQIM, would lead attacks planned for Borno as well as the northern states of Katsina, Kaduna and Yobe.

Shariah is already in force in 12 northern states, where Christians are supposed to be exempt but are often compelled to comply by various sectors of society. Borno state, where Boko Haram has its base, is one of the states implementing Islamic law.

After the death of Yusuf, the extremist Islamic sect has been led by Abu Zaid, who last October claimed responsibility for bombing churches in Borno state. Zaid told the Hausa-language service of the BBC and Voice of America at that time that the group attacks as a means of pressuring the government to allow Islamic law in Nigeria.

Dr. Abdulateef Adegbite, secretary-general of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, has said Muslim leaders do not support the activities of Boko Haram.

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*.