

Four Christians Killed as Anti-Christian Violence Escalates in This Country

Unidentified assailants killed four Catholics and destroyed a statue of the Virgin Mary in northern Burkina Faso, a bishop said on Tuesday, the third deadly attack against Christians in the West African country in the span of two weeks.

Paul Ouedraogo, who is president of the episcopal conference of Burkina Faso and neighboring Niger, did not provide further details about Monday's attack in the diocese of Ouahigouya, but it confirms a trend toward increasingly sectarian violence amid a strengthening jihadist insurgency.

The violence threatens to upend traditionally peaceful relations between Burkina Faso's majority Muslim community and its Christians, who represent up to a quarter of the population.

Ouedraogo, addressing other bishops in the capital Ouagadougou, said that a priest in western Niger had also been shot in the hand and the leg on Monday but survived the attack.

"All of this indicates that our West African region is strongly troubled," he said.

Attacks by groups with links to Islamic State and al Qaeda have surged this year in Burkina Faso and across the broader Sahel region, an arid expanse of scrubland just south of the Sahara desert.

They have worked to sow ethnic tensions between farming and herding communities in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in order to boost recruitment among marginalized communities.

No one has claimed responsibility for the church attacks yet, but after gunmen killed a Catholic priest and five parishioners on Sunday, the government of Burkina Faso blamed “terrorist groups ... attacking religion with the macabre aim of dividing us.”

The first church attack occurred in late April, when gunmen in northern Burkina Faso killed a Protestant pastor and five congregants.

On Monday, the Federation of Islamic Associations of Burkina (FAIB) condemned the previous two attacks, calling in a statement for all citizens of Burkina Faso “without exception for religion or ethnicity ... to unite against terrorism.” {eo}

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