

Gunmen Kidnap French Priest in Cameroon

Gunmen have kidnapped a French priest working in the lawless region of northern Cameroon, authorities said on Thursday, nine months after Nigerian Islamist sect Boko Haram seized a French family in the same area.

A church official told Radio France International that English-speaking gunmen burst into the parish church of Nguetchewe, a village some 10 km (6 miles) from the Nigerian border, demanding money on Wednesday night.

When they discovered the priest, Georges Vandenbeusch, they marched him barefoot across the village and fled on motorbikes.

“According to a village chief, some motorbikes later crossed the frontier to Nigeria and their riders started to celebrate. So it’s likely they took the priest to Nigeria,” Henri Djionyang, vicar-general of Maroua, told RFI.

The Far North province of Cameroon is francophone, but English is the language of neighboring Nigeria.

The kidnapping was the latest in a series of attacks on French targets in West Africa since France launched a military intervention in Mali in January to oust al-Qaida Islamists there, who had forged links with **Boko Haram**.

Nigeria has complained that Far North is being used by Boko Haram militants to transport weapons and hide from a six-month military offensive against them. It has appealed to Cameroon to tighten border security.

The United States formally designated Boko Haram and the Nigerian Islamist militant group Ansaru as foreign terrorist

organizations on Wednesday, making it a crime to provide them with material support.

France's Foreign Ministry said checks were under way to establish the identity of the kidnappers.

Augustine Fonka Awa, the governor of Far North region, told Reuters he had gone to Nguetchewe with security forces to investigate the kidnapping but also expressed fears that the priest had been taken to Nigeria.

Vandenbeusch arrived in Cameroon in 2011, having previously had been a priest in the Paris suburb of Sceaux. He decided to stay in the region—which France considers to be high risk for kidnappings and has warned its citizens to leave—although he was aware of the danger, the Foreign Ministry said.

Alain Marsaud, a French lawmaker representing voters based overseas, told France Info radio that Vandenbeusch had been meeting some nuns and other people when armed men took him.

"We have good reason to believe that it may have been people from Nigeria and Boko Haram in particular," Marsaud said.

If confirmed to be the work of Boko Haram, the attack would be the latest of series by Islamists targeting French citizens in the region.

Two French journalists were killed in northern Mali this month in an attack claimed by **al-Qaida** in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in retaliation for France's operations in Mali. Security experts say, however, the killing may have been the result of a botched kidnapping for money.

Boko Haram kidnapped a French family of seven on holiday in northern Cameroon in February and released them in April.

French President Francois Hollande denied a ransom was paid but a confidential Nigerian government report obtained by Reuters said Boko Haram was given the equivalent of \$ million

by French and Cameroonian negotiators.

Four French hostages abducted in northern Niger were also freed last month. French media reported a 20-million-euro ransom had been paid, something Paris strongly denied.

France still has one of its citizens held in Nigeria by Ansaru. There are two more French hostages being held in the Sahel region by suspected Islamists and four French journalists held in Syria.

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