

Islamic Terrorism Shuttters Nigeria Churches

Christians in northern Nigeria's Borno state, already forced to abandon worship services due to attacks by Islamic sect Boko Haram, are bracing for a massive assault to commemorate the death of the extremists group's leader at the end of the month.

Christians are streaming out of Maiduguri, about 540 miles northeast of the Nigerian capital of Abuja, where some of the worst-hit churches are located. Churches are shutting down as many of their members have lost their lives in attacks that have not ceased even after security agencies were enlisted to confront the assailants.

Compass witnessed most church buildings were shuttered and guarded by soldiers and police in the Maiduguri areas of Wulari-Jerusalem, Railway Station, Bulunkutu, Damboa Road, and Bayan NNPC. Some churches bold enough to open were compelled to reschedule their worship services in order to outmaneuver militants who knew that most services start at 10 a.m.

"As you can see, the town is unsafe, and it is just appropriate for any church leader to be reasonable and safe," a pastor with the Apostolic Church who declined to give his name for fear of attack told Compass. "We took the decision to hold a one-and-a-half-hour service earlier than our usual time so that our people can return home in time because of the threat."

Church leaders said The Living Faith Church (Winners Chapel) in Maiduguri's Bulunkuttu area and the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN) in the Gomari area have seen attendance at worship drastically reduced – from 2,250 to 759 for the Living Faith Church, and from 500 to 240 for the COCIN body.

In early June the Islamic sect attacked St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Maiduguri twice, killing a total of 10 people in bombings on June 1 and June 7.

"The Islamic bombers, driving in a Honda car, stormed the church in the afternoon of that fateful day and threw the bombs into the church premises," said police spokesman Abdulahi Lawal of the June 7 incident.

A Catholic priest at the St. Patrick's Catholic Church who requested anonymity told Compass that the attack of June 7 took place in mid-afternoon, with about 50 members gathered inside.

The Rev. Yuguda Mdurvwa, chairman of the Borno state chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria, told Compass that besides St. Patrick's and the COCIN church, churches attacked in Maiduguri include a Church of the Brethren (EYN) and several others. He said CAN leadership has directed churches to either suspend or reschedule their church services due to the dangers.

On the afternoon of June 16, Boko Haram militants attacked a Church of the Brethren congregation in Damboa, about 87 kilometers (54 miles) from Maiduguri, killing four persons.

Declaring Jihad

Members of the Jama'atu ahlus Sunnah lid da'awati wal Jihad, popularly known as Boko Haram, have claimed responsibility for these church bombings and other attacks. Moreover, the Islamist sect that has declared jihad on the Nigerian government 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 dead under mysterious circumstances.

Religious freedom analyst Elizabeth Kendal wrote in her

Religious Liberty Monitoring blog that in June 2010, that Boko Haram formalized its links with Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Kendal notes that terrorism analyst Yossef Bodansky predicts this development could lead to the emergence of large-scale terrorism, including suicide bombings, unknown in Nigeria.

Kendal notes, Nigeria's *Saturday Tribune* reported on July 9 that the government is expecting more than 100 jihadists trained in Sudan and Somalia to lead the 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.

Boko Haram has issued statements to media organizations asserting the desire to impose its extremist version of *Shariah* (Islamic law) on all of Nigeria. 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, said Muslim leaders did not support the activities of Boko Haram, and that they were finding it difficult to reach out to the militant sect. He pleaded with members of Boko Haram to put an end to the senseless killings.

"Our plea is that you cease fire and embrace peace," he said.

“We can’t continue to go on like this.”

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*.

Northern Nigeria climbed to 23rd place in 2010 from 27th in 2009 on Christian support organization Open Doors’ World Watch List of nations with the worst persecution.

Church Response

Ayo Oritsejafor, president of CAN, said he wondered how the militant sect could continue to carry out deadly attacks on churches in spite of the presence of security agencies. He said Christian leaders believe the sect has compromised or infiltrated security forces.

“The way and manner this is happening shows that some of our intelligence security operatives have either been compromised, or their rank-and-file are already infiltrated by members of this Islamic sect,” he said.

The Rev. Paul Emeka, general superintendent of the Assemblies of God Church, Nigeria, lamented that the violence of Boko Haram has gone unchecked.

“They have burned churches and forced many Christians to run away from their homes,” he said.

He warned that the Muslim militants’ violence could divide the country along religious lines. Peter Okoduwa, a Pentecostal pastor, concurred, saying the Islamic sect has infiltrated the ranks of security agencies and warning that if the government does not take decisive action, the country’s Christian/Muslim divide will deepen.

Dr. David Oyedepo, bishop of Living Faith Church, said the government needs to step up its prosecution of the sect.

"This Boko Haram has to be frontally dealt with before they plunge the entire nation into a very serious crisis," Oyedepo said. "The federal government should deal with the issue tactfully before the sect sets the entire nation ablaze. Those behind the crisis should be fished out and dealt with and there should be no sympathy for them."

The Rev. Ladi Thompson, coordinator of the Macedonian Initiative, a ministry to Christians facing persecution, said Boko Haram has plans to attack more churches in the months ahead, putting Christians under more pressure, unless the government takes immediate steps to strengthen security.

Church leaders said they are aware that the Islamic sect could be an offshoot of Al Qaeda and are urging Nigerian security agencies to rise to the challenge.

President Goodluck Jonathan has admitted that the attacks were carried out by the Islamic terrorist group that has declared war on the nation.

"Everybody is a target when it comes to terrorist attacks," Jonathan told media. "Terrorists will aim at the top. If they can bomb the president, they will do it."

Nigeria has created a military task force headed by . Jack Okechukwu Nwaogbo to hunt down members of the Islamic sect. Nwaogbo told journalists in Maiduguri on June 27 that authorities had arrested two members of the sect carrying explosives to bomb a church in the city. He explained that these members of Boko Haram pretended they wanted to convert from Islam in order to gain access to the church building and bomb it.