

Muslim-Christian Conflict Shuts Down Nigeria Churches

Christian churches and worship centers were completely shut down on Sunday in the central Nigerian town of Wukari following religious riots that broke out Saturday in the town between Muslims and Christians.

Security agencies report that so far 31 persons have been killed, while pastors in the town say dozens of houses of Christians were burnt, including that of the president of the Christian Reformed of Christ in Nigeria (CRCN), the Rev. Dr. Caleb Ahema.

Religious violence erupted in the town on Saturday when an argument broke out between a Muslim soccer fan and another Christian soccer fan in a playing field. Eyewitnesses say the Muslim retreated from the soccer pitch and went to his house and then returned to the field and shot the Christian. This killing of the Christian caused a fight in the soccer field and then spread to the rest of the town and villages.

As of Monday, when Charisma News established contacts with some pastors in Wukari, they said restriction of movement in the town has been enforced by Nigeria's security agencies and that all residents have been confined to their homes.

"A 24-hours curfew is in place here and anyone who attempts to move out of his house is shot by military and police personnel," the Rev. Patrick Achowura, the President of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Wukari Chapter told Charisma News via his mobile phone from Wukari.

The restriction of movement by security agents shut down all churches in the town on Sunday as worship services could not

be held, Achowura told Charisma News. "Soldiers have been drafted to the town and a 24-hours curfew imposed. No movement is allowed so it is impossible to take inventory of churches destroyed by Muslims. Also, there were no worship services yesterday (Sunday) in all churches in the town and fighting continued throughout Sunday. But as of today (Monday), we have not heard gunshots," Achowura said.

Narrating how the incident occurred, Achowura told Charisma News that: "The crisis began when, on Saturday, a Muslim shot and killed a Christian on a football field. At the time of the attacks on Christians around 10 a.m., most Christians in the town were holding a conference at the worship auditorium of the Christian Reformed Church of Christ in Nigeria (CRCN). And so, Muslims in the town went on rampage without restriction to burn down houses and shops belonging to Christians."

Joseph Zhema, another Christian resident of the town of Wukari, who also spoke to Charisma News from Wukari, said, "The crisis was ignited by an argument between two soccer fans, a Muslim and a Christian. The Muslim after the heated argument went to his house and brought a gun and killed the Christian youth, a member of the Reformed Church in this town."

Zhema, a member of the Christian Reformed Church of Christ in Nigeria, said "the death of the Christian sparked a crisis that spread across town and in villages. Curfew is in place and it is difficult to say how many persons have been killed, but we heard that a number of those killed have been given mass burial by security agents."

Zhema explained that they were in the church for a conference when the incident occurred, and that the home of the president of the Reformed Church, Rev. (Dr.) Caleb Ahema, and many other members of the church were burnt down by Muslims in Wukari.

Wukari is in the heart of the mission field of the Christian Reformed Church Missions, which planted the Christian Reformed Church of Christ in Nigeria in 1940 among the Jukun ethnic group. Today, the Reformed Church is the dominant feature of the Christian faith in Wukari and beyond.