

Nigerian Church Leaders Call Election Violence Probe

Christian leaders have called for an investigation into political violence that targeted churches and Christian homes, with at least one clergyman saying yesterday that Islamic attacks following the election of a Christian president were premeditated.

Pastor Emmanuel Nuhu Kure of Throneroom Trust Ministry based in Kafanchan in Kaduna state, reportedly said at a press briefing that the religious component of the political violence should not be discounted.

“How would you explain a spontaneous call to prayer on most of the loudspeakers of the mosques across the city at the same time, at 9 p.m. or thereabout in the night, with a shout of ‘Allah Akbar’ as Muslims began to troop towards the mosques and designated areas, to be followed at 10 p.m. with another call on loudspeakers—this time with a spontaneous shout of ‘Allah Akbar’ from the mosques and most of the streets occupied by Muslims and the burst of gunfire sound that shook the whole city?” Pastor Kure said. “This was repeated a few times, and the killings and burnings began.”

Christians suffered many casualties in the north-central state of Kaduna after supporters of Muslim presidential candidate Muhammudu Buhari lost the April 16 federal election to Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian. Primarily Muslim rioters claimed vote fraud, although international observers praised the polls as the fairest since 1999.

“How come the Muslim fighters ... were neatly surrounding the walls of the Anglican Cathedral and the Yoruba Baptist pastor’s house and setting them on fire while shooting, without any resistance, if it was not premeditated and

planned?" Pastor Kure reportedly said.

As many as 300 Christians were reportedly slain in Kaduna, with 14,000 fleeing their homes after Islamic attacks.

Over the weekend Christian leaders in northern Nigeria called for a federal probe into the post-election violence, saying more than 200 church buildings were burned.

"The violence was both political and religious, because Christians, our churches and property, were the main targets for the destruction by the perpetrators of the violence," the chairman and secretary of the northern branch of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Peter Jatau and Saidu Dogo respectively, said in a press statement on Saturday (April 30).

The violence broke out in some northern states when protesting Muslim youths went on a rampage, attacking mainly Christians, many of whom retaliated with counter offensives. No reliable figure of the total of Christians killed has emerged as church leaders were still trying to make determinations; some assumed dead have shown up later at resettlement camps.

"CAN in 19 northern states feel that the time has come for the federal government to take decisive steps to put the persistent carnage in the north under the guise of religious fanaticism to a stop and bring the perpetrators to justice," the CAN leaders said their statement.

Bishop Jonas Katung, national vice president of the North Central Zone of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, said in a statement released on Friday (April 29) that the post-election attacks were "a descent into barbarism" in which northern Christians were targeted and subjected to horrendous and relentless acts.

In Katsina-Buhari's home state—65 churches were either burned or damaged, Katung said, and more than 100 Christian men,

women and children from the border town of Jiba have fled to the neighboring Niger Republic.

“Seven Christians were left dead, several people have been wounded and many others have fled to their respective states of origin,” he said.

Katung added that 28 Christians in Bauchi state, including the Rev. Isman Dogari of the Evangelical Church of West Africa were killed, while 78 church buildings and other properties were set ablaze between April 16 and 19. In Gombe state, he added, 38 Christians were killed, 17 church buildings and 27 houses were burned. The assailants also set 11 cars on fire. In Zamfara state, five church buildings and one pastor’s house were burned; in Jigawa state, 17 churches were burnt in Hadeija and seven in Jahun, he said.

While Christians do not call for vengeance, Katung said there was a need to identify those who instigated the attacks on Christians to prevent them from occurring anew.

“We refuse to accept the subterfuge of ‘spontaneous combustion,’” he said. “If we are to curb the repeated propensity to instigate violence, those holding the bellows to the flames of intemperance must be held to account for the logical and expected consequences of their excesses.”

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom’s (USCIRF) 2011 Annual Report, released on Thursday (April 28), recommended Nigeria be placed on the U.S. Department of State’s list of worst violators of religious freedom. It cited the Nigerian government as “tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom by failing to respond adequately and effectively to prevent and contain acts of religiously-related violence, prevent reprisal attacks, and bring those responsible for such violence to justice.”

USCIRF has recommended that Nigeria be designated as a Country of Particular Concern, or CPC, since 2009.

“Years of inaction by Nigeria’s federal and state governments have created a climate of impunity, resulting in thousands of death,” the report states. “Other religious freedom concerns in Nigeria include the expansion of sharia (Islamic law) into the criminal codes of several northern Nigerian states and discrimination against minority communities of Christians and Muslims.”

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.

“Persecution of Christians in northern Nigeria originates from the non-equality between Muslims and non-Muslims based upon certain interpretations of the holy scriptures of Islam,” the organization said in its rankings, released in January. “In the history of the region, the Hausa-Fulani Muslims of north Nigeria applied this notion of non-equality to all non-Muslims they conquered in their 19-century jihad.”

Nigeria’s population of more than 158.2 million is almost evenly 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.