

Nigerian Church Leaders: Violence Against Christians Continues, but Government in Denial

A pregnant woman and a child were among four people killed in attacks by suspected Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria's Plateau State last month.

The attackers targeted the villages of Ancha and Tafigana in the Bassa Local Government area, as reported by news site *Nasoweseonline*.

Margaret Wakili, 27, from Ancha—who was 6 months pregnant—was killed at the farm where she was visiting her husband. They both fled, but the attackers caught Margaret. As they killed her, her husband heard them shout “‘Allahu Akbar, we have killed infidel, we need to kill more,” he said. He identified the eight attackers as Fulani from Hayin Rukuba. An older woman in the village was also killed.

In Tafigana, a 46-year-old father, Thomas Wollo, and his 7-year-old son, Nggwe, were killed and then beheaded as they returned home from choir practice on the night of July 14.

Following these killings, the attackers went on to a nearby village, where they destroyed crops to the value of millions of naira, according to Zongo Lawrence, publicity secretary of Miango (a village near Bassa) Youth Development Association.

“We have been experiencing daily attacks by Fulani herdsmen in our communities, most especially on Sundays (worship days) and Thursdays (market days) respectively. They want to displace us at all costs, and we are not ready to give out our lands no matter their evil act,” he said.

Meanwhile, Nigeria's former president, Olusegun Obasanjo, has said he is deeply concerned about the downward spiral of violence the country seems to be caught in, according to Nigeria's Guardian.

In an open letter addressed to current president Muhammadu Buhari, he warned of the consequences if the government can't "get a handle" on the situation. Handing the country over to the likes of the Islamist Boko Haram insurgency and Fulani militants "may lead to planned reprisal attacks against Fulanis, which may inadvertently or advertently mushroom into pogrom or Rwanda-type genocide that we did not believe could happen, and yet it happened," he said.

Nigeria's government has been criticized for its inaction which, according to Amnesty International, has led to an escalation of the conflict between herders and farmers.

As World Watch Monitor has reported, the attacks are concentrated in the states in Nigeria's "Middle Belt" which straddles the precolonial line dividing the predominantly Muslim north from its Christian south.

In Denial

Some Christian groups, such as the National Christian Elders Forum, have accused the Buhari government of not doing enough and of using the conflicts to advance its own agenda. The Nigerian High Commissioner to the U.K., George Adetola Oguntade, denied the claim in a letter sent to British parliamentarians last month: "The safety and security of all Nigerians, whatever their faith, is a fundamental priority of the Buhari government," he wrote. "The government knows that Nigeria can only achieve its potential if there is religious tolerance and cooperation."

The security challenges in Nigeria are neither religious nor ethnic, the high commissioner wrote. He said the clashes between herders and farmers over land predated the Buhari

administration. As for the Boko Haram insurgency, he said the government was committed to eradicating the terrorist group.

In response, the Elders' Forum said the high commissioner is in denial about how "conflicting ideologies of democracy and Sharia [are] affecting the country, men and women and what may happen to future generation of Nigerians."

The Nigerian government and some analysts have portrayed the events unfolding in Nigeria as disputes over resources. Others, however, say the thousands of Christians killed in what the International Crisis Group says are no longer are "spontaneous reactions to provocations but pre-meditated scorched-earth campaigns," is evidence a more sinister agenda is at work and that refusing to acknowledge it is hampering efforts to find solutions.

Existential Threat

In Nigeria's northeast and Middle Belt, where Boko Haram and militant herdsmen of the ethnic Fulani have wrought havoc, the harassment and violence poses an existential threat to the church, said Rev. Gideon Para-Mallam in the latest edition of Lausanne Global Analysis magazine: it has already led to a "virtual abandonment of missions and evangelism in some affected areas". Left unchecked, he writes, "the death of the Church [in Nigeria] could be a matter of years away."

Young Christians in particular have become increasingly frustrated with what they perceive to be inaction by the government and the church. Para-Mallam said that, in the majority-Muslim north, decades of pressure on Christians have caused "faith fatigue" and discouragement, leading some to find security elsewhere, including in a militant response.

This article originally appeared at World Watch Monitor.