

Nigerian Churches: We Will Not Stay Silent Amid Persecution

Nigeria's largest church network is calling on the country's president for more protection from Boko Haram attacks.

The president, meanwhile, is calling for more prayer.

"We will not keep silence amidst persecution Christians are facing," the Rev. Ayo Oritsejafor, president of the Christian Association of Nigeria, told World Watch Monitor on March 7.

"The killings in Northern Nigeria are condemnable and act of wickedness to humanity," Oritsejafor said. "It is unfortunate that worshippers are being killed in their homes and places of worship. We are not happy with this trend and will continue to pray to God to bring an end to this excruciating situation we are going through in Northern Nigeria."

Deadly attacks have been carried out on an almost daily basis in central and northern-eastern States of Nigeria. On Saturday night, three churches were burnt down to ashes in an attack attributed to Boko Haram in Fota town, in the Gombi Local Government area of Adamawa state.

The attackers, suspected to be from the militant Islamic Boko Haram insurgency, also burnt down a police station and killed seven police men before moving to the churches, said the Rev. Lawrence Dim, a Catholic priest in the area.

"Many of the people have fled the area, but [the attackers] burnt down three churches: there is EYN and LCCN Churches and one other church. They also injured some people and killed some," Dim told World Watch Monitor, though he did not estimate the number of victims.

On Feb. 26, at least 14 people were killed in coordinated attacks by heavily armed Boko Haram fighters on Kirchinga, Michika and Shuwa villages in Adamawa State. Many properties including three Catholic churches were set on fire. More than 400 were killed in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states in February.

In Central Nigeria, widely called the Middle belt, the predominantly Christian Berom community has sustained heavy loss following increasing attacks by suspected Fulani herdsmen.

Eighteen people, most of them women and children, were killed on March 4 and 5 in four villages—Dorok, Gwon, Gwarama, and Gwarim; all in the Riyom Local Government area of Plateau State. Among the victims were eight people of the same family. The assailants, wearing military-style uniforms and armed with sophisticated weapons, burnt more than 200 houses, churches and other places of prayer.

According to one survivor, who identified himself as Peter Daniel, the attackers vowed to annihilate residents who returned back to their villages.

Across Plateau state, at least 163 people have been killed in attacks by suspected Fulanis since the beginning of the year. Each wave of violence brings renewed criticism, from the Christian Association of Nigeria and other quarters, that Nigerian security forces are not doing enough to stop the killings.

Of Nigeria's estimated 160 million people, about 70 million are Christians. The CAN is their most representative umbrella group, comprising notably five major denominational groups: the Catholic Church in Nigeria, the Christian Council of Nigeria, the Christian Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, the Organization of African Instituted Churches, and the Evangelical Church Winning All.

Rev. Oritsejafor, the CAN president, appealed to government

and security agencies to be proactive towards protecting lives and properties, and to prosecute the perpetrators.

On Feb. 5, Nigeria President Goodluck Jonathan sacked his army chiefs, replacing them with new generals with orders to crush Boko Haram. More recently, a presidential spokesman acknowledged the conflict with Boko Haram is a “war situation” and that the army is dealing with a “serious enemy.”

On March 9, President Goodluck Jonathan called for more prayer to defeat the insurgency.

“We need more prayers to end terrorism. With prayers and the measures put in place, we will surmount the challenges”, the president said in a speech at the opening session of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, in Abuja, the federal capital.

The government’s inability to put down the Islamist surge has raised widespread criticism from religious and political leaders. Violence is expected only to increase as federal elections scheduled for February 2015 approach.

The 2011 election Jonathan, a Christian from Nigeria’s south, prompted unprecedented violence across the largely Muslim north in which at least 170 Christians were killed, hundreds were injured and thousands displaced, and more than 350 churches were burned or destroyed by mobs.