

Nigerian Violence Claims Lives of Christians

Amid sectarian violence by Muslims, Christians and security forces in this capital city of Plateau state, a flash point for ethnic and religious conflict in Nigeria, scores of Christians were estimated to have been killed in the past month.

Christmas Eve bombings by Islamic extremists have touched off tit-for-tat violence that has killed more than 200 people in Plateau state, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW). A Jan. 27 report by HRW said the Christmas bombings in Jos left at least 107 dead.

In the predominantly Christian Barkin Ladi Government Area on the outskirts of Jos, Muslim assailants led by a police officer from Abuja on Jan. 27 killed 14 Christians, according to a military spokesman, and the next day Muslim youths stabbed two students at the University of Jos on the assumption that they were Christians.

Capt. Charles Ekeocha, spokesman for the Special Task Force (STF) charged with maintaining order in Jos, said the Muslim attackers in the Barkin Ladi area invaded four Christian villages in the early hours of Jan. 27, killing eight Christians in Dorowa, two in Nding Susut, three in Fanloh and one in Nding Jok. Military forces with assistance of villagers arrested 29 of the assailants, killing two in the process, he said.

"On arrival at [Dorowa] village, the [Christian] youths directed them to the route of the fleeing attackers," Ekeocha said. "The troops of the STF pursued the attackers, who opened fire on sighting us. Two of the attackers were killed; one of our soldiers was also shot. Two AK-47 rifles, two pistols and

ammunition were recovered. One AK-47 and a pistol were also found in a mosque there.”

Ekeocha said policeman Mohammed Uba led the attacks against the Christian communities and was arrested. Uba, from the 44 Police Mobile Force in Abuja, was carrying firearms and four cartridges, Ekeocha added.

At the University of Jos, weekend clashes between students and Hausa Muslim youths following an attack by the youths on Jan. 28 left at least four persons dead and 20 injured. A former student of the university who requested anonymity noted that the attack was due to the university being seen as an institution controlled and dominated by Christians.

“It was simply an attack on a perceived Christian-dominated institution—one of very few institutions still functional in Jos,” said the source, though quick to add that area violence is more politically motivated than religious. “It seems their aim was to paralyze everything in Jos, and so force the state government to accede to their demands.”

A Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART) partner in Jos reported that STF soldiers did nothing as the Muslim youths stabbed two students; when other students protested their inaction, the soldiers shot at them, injuring seven.

Clashes between the students and Muslims the next day led to Christian homes and shops being set ablaze, allegations of soldiers mistakenly shooting at the youths rushing to save their businesses, and retaliatory burnings of Muslim homes and businesses, according to HART. A soldier reportedly fired at youths in the predominantly Christian area of Farin Gada, killing a 6-year-old boy.

“The military have been so compromised that Muslims want only Muslim soldiers in their areas, and Christians are calling for only Christian soldiers,” said a HART source. “There have been some very questionable killings of civilians by soldiers.”

At press time, at least four persons were reported killed in the weekend clashes, and 20 Christian students were receiving hospital treatment.

Protest Marches

On Monday (Jan. 31), thousands of Christian women in Plateau state held a protest march in Jos, calling for the removal of the STF. Clad in black, the women accused the STF force of bias and of shooting at innocent Christians. They urged the federal government to reconstitute it.

Muslim women clad in white held a counter-protest on Thursday (Feb. 3) in support of the STF. They accused other security forces of indiscriminate arrests and shooting at innocent Muslims.

Previously Brig. Gen. Hassan Umaru, commander of the STF, said the task of restoring peace is challenging as Muslim extremists have perfected guerrilla warfare tactics.

"The situation in Jos has always dared the entire security system in the country and is now gradually assuming a new dimension," he said in a message read at a recent funeral. "It is a new challenge for security agencies."

Christian groups have also accused soldiers and police of taking sides.

"We deplore the many instances where Muslim soldiers have aided and participated in the attack on villages," the North Central Zone of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) stated in a Jan. 24 newspaper advertisement signed by the Rev. J.K. Katung, PFN national vice president, and the Rev. S. Dangana, PFN secretary. "In a Christian-dominated state such as Plateau, we wonder why the entire commanding structure of the state police command should be headed by Muslims."

Citing heavy casualty figures, the Christian leaders accused

the Muslim minority of trying to take control of the state. The PFN condemned a call by the Plateau State Chapter of the Muslim Council of Ulama calling for a state of emergency as a solution to the Jos violence, which they said would lead to Muslim control.

“The ill-concealed Islamic agenda of the Ulama is to make Plateau state ungovernable so as to justify the truncating of democracy,” they stated. “It is indeed a demonstration of insensitivity to Christian sensibilities that this Islamic group will come out barely four weeks after the unprovoked bombing of Christians preparing for Christmas celebration by an Islamic terrorist to demand for a state of emergency in the state.”

The Rt. Rev. Benjamin Kwashi, archbishop of the Jos archdiocese of the Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion, said at a recent funeral service for 16 Christians killed in Jebbu Bass village that Muslim extremists have not been reined in.

“The church has been the major receiver of the effects of every crisis in this state, and politics is only being used as a cover-up,” he said.

The Rev. Mwelbish Dafes and the Rev. Chuwang Davou, chairman and secretary respectively of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Plateau state chapter, said in a Jan. 23 statement that, “there seems to be no serious attempt to properly handle the situation, either in forestalling future occurrences or purposefully prosecuting the perpetrators in order to serve as a deterrent to others.”

After several bombings by the Islamic extremist Boko Haram in Christian areas of Jos on Dec. 24, 2010 that killed scores of people, the Christian communities of Dogon Karfe, Anglo Jos, and Bukuru (Agwan Doki) came under heavy attacks from Muslim militants. As a result, Grace of Apostolic Church in the Dogon Karfe area of Jos city was demolished, sources said.

In Maiduguri, capital of Borno state in northern Nigeria, a Baptist pastor and five other Christians were killed on Christmas Eve. The Rev. Bulus Marwa and the other Christians were killed in the Dec. 24 attacks on Victory Baptist Church in Alemderi and a Church of Christ in Nigeria congregation in Sinimari by the outlawed Islamic Boko Haram, which is opposed to Western education.

Prior to the bombings, talk of Muslim militants vowing to ensure that Christians did not celebrate Christmas had spread around Jos. Christian leaders said they were surprised that in spite of this open secret, security agencies made no efforts to ensure that these Muslim extremists did not carry out their threats.

An uneasy calm has come over Jos since the weekend attacks, protests and counter-protests.

"Nobody is sure of what can happen at any time," said Aminu Yusuf, a Jos-based journalist. "For now, there is calm except for the recent clash between the students of the University of Jos and some Muslim Hausa youths. But we are all on alert."