

Pastor, 5 Congregants Shot to Death in Church Attack

Unidentified gunmen killed a pastor and five congregants at a Protestant church in northern Burkina Faso on Sunday, authorities said, the first attack on a church in a country that has seen an upsurge of Islamist violence this year.

Burkina Faso, which boasts of a history of religious tolerance, has been beset by a rise in attacks as groups based in neighboring Mali seek to extend their influence over the Sahel, the arid scrubland south of the Sahara.

The government declared a state of emergency in several northern provinces bordering Mali in December because of deadly Islamist attacks, including in Soum, the region where Sunday's attack took place.

Spokesman Remy Fulgance Dandjinou said on Monday that the latest attack was the first to target a church in the majority Muslim country where religious groups have historically lived together peacefully and frequently intermarried.

"Armed every interest in troubling or going against the good understanding between religions. We have observed this strategy in other countries in the region and in the world," said Rinaldo Depagne, West Africa Project Director at International Crisis Group.

Government spokesman Dandjinou told Reuters the attack took place in the commune of Silgadji. He said he was unable to provide more detail on the attack or the perpetrators.

Around 55 to 60 percent of Burkina Faso's population is Muslim, roughly 20-25 percent are Christian and the rest follow indigenous religions, according to the U.S. State Department.

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