

Radical Islamists Suspected of Killing at Least 12 Christians During Church

At least 12 Christians, including a pastor and a deacon, were killed by unknown gunmen in separate attacks in Northern Nigeria. The gunmen are suspected to be connected to the extremist group **Boko Haram**. Witnesses told the press that the gunmen also set a church on fire on Christmas Eve in connection with the attack.

Late on Christmas Eve, gunmen entered the village of Peri in Nigeria's "middle belt" state of Yobe. "A group of gunmen entered the village around midnight and went straight to the church," a resident of Peri told the *Deccan Chronicle*. "They opened fire on them, killing the pastor and five worshipers. They then set fire to the [Evangelical Church of West Africa in Peri]."

The head of the Christian Association of Nigeria in Yobe State told the *African Free Press* that many of the worshipers of the Evangelical Church of West Africa were "still missing."

"I have been informed that six bodies have been recovered," an official told the African Free Press. "Some who lived near the church fled their homes during the attack and it is assumed that they are still hiding in the bush."

Christian houses that were near the church were also attacked and set on fire.

In a separate attack, worshipers at the First Baptist Church in Maiduguri, in Borno state, were also attacked by unknown gunman. A deacon and five church members were killed.

Boko Haram is suspected to be behind this attack even though the group has yet to claim responsibility. Boko Haram is known to target Christians, their places of **worship** and government institutions. The extremist group is fighting to establish a separate Islamic state in Nigeria's northern regions. Most of the violence perpetrated by Boko Haram has taken place along Nigeria's "Middle Belt" region where the predominantly Christian South borders the Muslim majority North. The group is believed to be responsible for killing over 3,000 people since it began its armed insurgency in 2009.

Leading up to the holiday, many Christians and government officials had been preparing for a potential attack by **Boko Haram**. The extremist group uses the holiday to instill terror into the especially vulnerable Christian population. Many Christians considered not attending church services because of the potential of being attacked.

ICC's Regional Manager for Africa, William Stark, says Christians and the Nigerian government have been bracing for an attack on Christmas. Unfortunately, he adds, their perpetrations were not able to protect Christians living in Peri.

"Every Christmas since 2010, Christians in Nigeria have been attacked by Boko Haram. Combined, 96 Christians have been killed on Christmas by Boko Haram over the past three years. Earlier this year, Boko Haram demanded all Christians leave Nigeria's North. Since then, the group has continued to wage a campaign of terror against those Christians who decided to stay," Stark says.

"The United States is still deciding whether to designate Boko Haram a Foreign Terrorist Organization, which if given, would allow the US to seize Boko Haram's assets under US jurisdiction. This would help stem the flow of arms and funds

the group receives from sources outside Nigeria's borders. The consistency of these attacks shows Nigeria's government is struggling to deal with the violence that has dominated its northern states since international community must take decisive action."