

Violence Over Funeral Procession Leaves 39 Dead in Nigeria

Security has been enforcing a 24-hour curfew in Wukari, Taraba State, in Central Nigeria due to the escalation of violence between Christians and Muslims on Friday, May 3, that left at least 39 people dead and at least 30 injured.

The bloody clash between the majority Christian Jukun community and the minority Fulani Muslims occurred during a burial procession for a traditional leader from the Jukun tribe.

The Jukuns are the ancestral people and majority inhabitants of Wukari and other parts of Taraba State. Many are Christians, a much smaller minority are animists and a few are Muslims. The mainly nomadic Fulani, predominantly Muslims, migrated to Wukari over the years.

In accordance with Jukun tradition, the bodies of high-ranking chiefs must be carried around the city prior to interment.

As the burial procession reached a predominantly Fulani area of the ancient city, youths there blocked the road and said no *arne* ("infidels" in Hausa) would be allowed to pass their part of town, claiming the procession was interrupting Friday prayers.

This heated encounter quickly escalated into violence.

World Watch Monitor met the Regional Secretary in Africa of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), Gideon Para-Mallam. He told us a church deacon friend of his, Michael, was shot and killed early in the outbreak, leaving a widow Esther and a child.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) reports that while police claim 39 people were killed, residents insist the figure is much higher, with 30 more injured.

CSW Nigeria reports that around 70 homes and shops were destroyed in the violence along with vehicles and other assets and that local sources estimate the total cost of the damage at over \$6 million, but WWM has so far not been able to verify this.

Local officials confirmed by phone to WWM that the town had been engulfed in violence, similar in scale to an earlier outbreak in February this year when an altercation between Muslim and Christian youths cost the lives of 40 and left about 400 homeless.

Reports say some youths were playing football when an argument started on the pitch. Before long, a Muslim is reported to have rushed to his nearby home, picked up a gun, and shot and killed a Christian youth. The reports said violence then quickly spread.

A judicial panel to investigate that incident had been commissioned on Thursday, one day before the clash over the funeral procession.

"The 24-hour curfew is still in force and all residents are indoors. Policemen and soldiers are patrolling the street to maintain law and order," Joseph Kwaji, police spokesman had told newsmen two days after the funeral.

Former federal Senator Danlami Ikenya, a Christian from Wukari, told World Watch Monitor that the clash was unfortunate considering that residents of the town have lived together for years in peace despite their different ethnic and religious affiliations.

"There is a place for burying traditional leaders where they have always been buried in the past," Ikenya said. "I don't

understand why such a burial should result in a clash between Christians and Muslims. The issue at stake is probably more than religious differences which appear to have triggered off the clash.”

Retired Nigerian Gen. Adamu Tubase Ibrahim, a Muslim leader, also expressed surprise about the incident noting that many innocent persons were killed during the attack over what he said should have been resolved amicably.

“What happened is unfortunate. The warring groups should sheath their swords and allow peace to reign,” Tubase said. “There is, however, need for the government to properly investigate what the real problem is.”