

Nigeria: Churches destroyed and police stations attacked by Islamic militants in four states over two days

Project(s): 39-838

Country/Region: NIGERIA

Coordinated attacks by Islamic militants in four states of Northern Nigeria on Sunday and Monday left an estimated 80 people dead, including two pastors. At least seven churches are reported destroyed, with other targets including four police stations, a prison and a customs post.

The violence began in Maiduguri, capital of Borno state, on Sunday 26 July when a police station, a prison and five church buildings were set on fire. Elsewhere in Borno a customs post was burnt. The following day the violence spread to Yobe state, where a police station was torched and two churches destroyed, and to Bauchi state and Kano state, each of which reports an attack on a police station. Police say that 50 militants and five police officers have been killed, but other sources suggest the total deaths are at least 150, maybe 250.

The violence eased when curfews were imposed. Security forces are now clamping down hard on the militants.

Large-scale anti-Christian violence flares up regularly in certain Nigerian states, though in this most recent violence it seems that the police were intended as targets as well as the Christians. Many local people feel that the security forces could have intervened in the preceding months to control the activities of these militants but failed to do so, perhaps because so many of the militants come from well connected families.

Targets in Kaduna state had been threatened but not attacked in the most recent round of violence. The Reverend Joseph John Hayab, the Kaduna State Secretary General of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), expressed concern that Christians would be dragged into the conflict, which he sees as primarily between the militants and the state authorities. "Before you know what is happening, we (Christians) will become victims of what we don't even know about," he commented.

Dr Patrick Sookhdeo, International Director of Barnabas Fund, says, "Our Christian brothers and sisters in Northern Nigeria are repeatedly the victims of mass violence, with churches burnt and people killed, just as we have seen again in the last few days. All too often, as in this case, it is apparent that the attacks have been well planned and orchestrated. Please pray for peace and stability in this part of Nigeria, also for freedom and justice for its Christian minority, which suffers much in the states where full sharia is in force. Pray that Christians will not retaliate."

Who is responsible?

The militants who launched the coordinated attacks are known by local people as the "Boko Haram" (meaning "Western education is a sin") or the "Nigerian Taliban", although they have no known connections with the Taliban of Afghanistan. The group's own name for itself is unknown, unless, as some reports say, it is part of Al-Sunna wal Jamma (Arabic for "The Group that Follows Muhammad's Way of Life").

The aim of the group, which was founded in Maiduguri, appears to be to impose an extreme form of sharia in Northern Nigeria, perhaps in the country as a whole, and to abolish Western-style education. Their leader and many of the group's members are believed to be university students or graduates, some from wealthy and influential families. All four states affected by the violence already implement sharia (Islamic law) but evidently not in as rigorous a form as the militants wish.

The same group is believed to have been responsible for the anti-Christian violence in Bauchi in February ([Nine Christians Killed as Violence Erupts in Northern Nigeria](#)). Al-Sunna wal Jamma's first spate of coordinated attacks began on 31 December 2003 and affected three towns of Yobe state.

Can you help the Christian victims?

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Please Pray:

Please pray that the Nigerian security forces will be able to ensure peace and stability in Northern Nigeria.

Pray for all who mourn family members killed in this bout of violence, remembering especially the loved ones and congregations of the two Christian pastors killed. Pray for Christians in Borno state and Yobe state whose churches have been burnt down, that they will have both the means and the permission to rebuild.

Pray that Christians will react to the violence in a Christ-like way and that this example will speak powerfully to the Muslim majority.