



HART Briefing: This Christmas in Jos



The city of Jos lies high on a plateau after which Plateau State in Nigeria is named. Cool and green, the state calls itself 'the home of peace and tourism.' However, Plateau State lies on the intersection between the Muslim northern states of Nigeria and the Christian and animist south and over the past decade, serious inter-community violence between the mainly Muslim Hausa-Fulani peoples and the predominantly Christian communities, has caused social polarisation and persecution of the church. Since 2001, many thousands have lost their lives and many communities have suffered the widespread destruction of homes, places of worship and livelihoods.

Christmas Eve bombings 2010

On 24th December 2010, 6 bombs were detonated at a Christmas Eve service in a Christian community in Jos. At least 32 people were killed and 74 injured in the attack which was later claimed by Boko Haram, an Islamist militant group operating across northern Nigeria. The governor of Plateau state, Da Jonah Jang, described the event, seen as a calculated assault on the Christian community, as a 'black Christmas for us on the Plateau when we should be celebrating peace'. Threats of another attack this Christmas have begun to circulate.

Recent years in Jos

Unfortunately, this was not an isolated incident and the frequency of clashes has been steadily increasing since 2007. In the last two years alone, over 1000 people have been killed in the centre of Jos and its surrounding villages.

In August of this year, reports came in of a fresh wave of violence in Barakin-Ladi, an area just outside the city centre. A group of Muslims went to the area of Gada Biyu for the Eid Festival prayer which marks the end of the Ramadan fasting period. The site, an Islamic school burnt down in the 2001 riots, was deep within a predominantly Christian community and also the location of the Christmas Eve bombings last year.

The group's request to travel was reportedly turned down by the police commissioner. As they converged in the city centre and had to walk 2km to reach what is still a sensitive location, the move was seen as an affront by young men from the Christian community and fighting broke out. Whilst security personnel moved in to prevent a clash, around 20 deaths were reported.

Reprisals by both communities were carried out as the news spread and homes of Christians in the centre of Jos were set on fire. There was also a reported death of a pastor. This incident, just one of many, illustrates the complexity of the conflict in Jos and the need for Imams and Christian leaders to continue their efforts to preach against revenge attacks and in favour of peace.

Worryingly, attacks on Christian communities are increasingly focused on women and children in what are being described as calculated and well-organised assaults. The Joint Task Forces inadequacy in protecting either community is fuelling anger and is encouraging revenge and counter-revenge strikes between the Muslim and Christian peoples of Jos. For example, in September, soldiers were given an order to shoot on sight anyone carrying a weapon which, although the order has been rescinded, this made it even harder for families to defend themselves.

The State government has also expressed concerns that soldiers have been complicit in, or even initiated attacks. In the week beginning 26th November 2011, 45 Christians have been killed in Barakin-Ladi, an area just outside Jos. Because of the attacks in the area, especially on the churches, church attendance has reportedly been very low in past few weeks, one church with a congregation of 1500, claimed their attendance has dropped to only 50 on recent Sundays.

National and International Response

"We are deeply concerned by the continuing intercommunal violence in the city of Jos and by the targeting of the surrounding Christian villages by Fulani tribesmen and Islamist militants. The continuing conflict in Plateau State has created a need for a more comprehensive response both in terms of humanitarian assistance and support for measures to promote genuine interfaith reconciliation. We are asking the British Government to facilitate a programme of reconciliation and reconstruction between the Muslim and Christian communities." – Baroness Cox, Founder and CEO of HART.

At the start of November, Pope Benedict XVI appealed for an end to all violence in Jos, saying it only increases problems, sowing hatred and division even among the faithful. The Roman Catholic Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama of Jos welcomed this message and responded that *"Only this week a group of young people Christian and Muslim came to me and told me they were tired of being used. They admitted they were the perpetrators of violence in the past but now they want to commit themselves to peace"*.

It is this message that Imams and Christian leaders are beginning to teach across the city. The Anglican church in Jos, headed by HART's partner Archbishop Ben Kwashi, has chosen to teach on the theme 'Amazing Grace' to demonstrate the importance of 'love thy neighbour'. This message that is particularly inspiring coming from Archbishop Ben and his wife Gloria who themselves have been subject to several personal attacks.

Archbishop Ben has called for greater attention to be given to the crisis in Jos internationally, *"It is in the best interest of both Christians and Muslims to keep Jos at peace. Historically, Jos has accommodated peoples of all nations on earth, especially the British. To ignore the security situation in Jos is to be careless not only about the people of Plateau State but also of the many Nigerians of every tribe, and the many internationals who have made Jos their home. Any crisis in Jos affects many people around the country and beyond. It is in the interest of the world to take note"*.

About HART

Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART) is a charitable organisation that works with 'forgotten people in forgotten lands'. For more information on HART's work, visit www.hart-uk.org.