

# An insurgency of terror

The crisis facing Christians in Nigeria



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## Summary

Following the abduction of more than 200 schoolgirls from Chibok town in 2014, the rise of Islamist terrorism in northern Nigeria has rightly drawn international condemnation. Yet some of the deadliest outbreaks remain unreported.

Thousands of Christians have died in communal attacks led by the Islamic State-aligned Boko Haram. Fulani militants have forced vulnerable rural communities to abandon their homes. And the imposition of Islamic law in several northern states has exacerbated deep-rooted religious divisions, causing thousands of Christians to flee.

We visited Nigeria to draw attention to such atrocities. Our conclusions – found on page 14 – are based on testimonies of children orphaned, villages destroyed, families killed and churches burned. While this short report is unable to reveal the full extent of their suffering, we hope it will provide at least some opportunity for redress.

# Background

## **Strategic land grabbing and the permanent displacement of Christian communities**

Ethnic and religious animosity has fuelled conflicts in Nigeria for decades. The existence of northern radical Islamist sects, for example, has been a source of considerable tension since the country gained independence in 1960. However, recent outbreaks by Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen suggest a worrying trend: their military capability and ideological fervour is increasing.

The Anglican Bishop of Bauchi, Musa Mwin Tula, represents many of the worst affected areas. He explained: "The conflict between herdsmen and farmers has existed for a long time. But the menace in recent times has jumped from a worrisome itch in the north to a cancerous disease, spreading throughout the country, claiming lives and threatening to spiral into a monster."

As recently as 14 November 2016, 41 Christians were killed by militants in Kauru, Kaduna state. As with other similar attacks, the village was remote and vulnerable. Herdsmen used sophisticated weaponry, forcing families to flee their homes and farmland.



Fulani militants killed 41 villagers in Kauru on 14 November 2016

Speaking after the assault, the MP for Kauru told us: “There is one attack after another. It has gone beyond rustling cattle. Land has been taken. Communities are forced to abandon their homes. It is violent expansionism.”

The Stefanos Foundation, which supports displaced persons in Nigeria, calculated 399 Boko Haram and Fulani attacks in 2015/16, resulting in 7,588 deaths.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This figure does not include the most recent attacks. Boko Haram are currently understood to be targeting the north east region: Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Taraba, Gombe and Bauchi. While militant Fulani herdsmen target the middle belt region: Jos, Benue, Nasarawa, Kaduna, Niger, FCT Abuja and Kogi.

# Testimonies

## Ropp district, Plateau State

Four farming villages in the Ropp district, Plateau State, were attacked on 18-19 May 2015: Lo-Biring, Jong, Rabuk and Zim. Armed militants killed 21 people.



Some of the villagers are seeking to rebuild their homes

We spoke with a handful of families who have chosen to return, either to bury their dead or rebuild their homes. Ropp is now surrounded by Fulani herdsmen and protected by two military personnel. Just minutes after we

left, the villages were ambushed, though thankfully no one was shot.

Describing the attack in 2015, one local pastor said: “People were just sitting and the enemies came. They started cutting them.”

Another said: “They were trained terrorists with guns. They killed those who couldn't run – the aged, the children and the blind. A pastor was the first casualty. They surrounded him. They killed him and then they rejoiced, shouting ‘Allahu Akhbar’ and ‘we have got a hero’.”



The ruins of a church, now surrounded by Fulani herdsmen and their cattle

Churches and homes have been reduced to rubble and the vast majority of the community has been displaced. For many, it is simply too dangerous to return.

As the pastor explained: “They say this is their land now. But it isn’t. It is ours. Even last August they fired shots to stop us coming here. We can’t come here without security.”

### **Safe haven for IDPs, Western Jos**

With the Fulani herdsmen holding on to territory rather than retreating after an attack, and Boko Haram fighting to overthrow the Government to create an Islamic state, thousands of Christians have been displaced. Many are now living in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps.

We visited a camp in Western Jos, Plateau State, currently home to 165 children and 30 adults. It is run by Tabitha Evangel Ministries (TEM) International Mission and Partners, established in 2002 to provide shelter for orphans, the homeless and ex-Muslim converts.

### **Bebra, aged 12**

“We were sleeping when the Boko Haram came. They surrounded my house and smashed the door. My brother pleaded with them: ‘If it is money you want, I will give it to you’. But they forced him to lie down and insisted on seeing my father. I watched as they shot my father and brother and sliced the back of their necks. They also went to the pastor’s

house, shooting his wife in the leg and his daughter in the hand. They shot the pastor and cut off his head. Then they went to the neighbour's house, broke his leg and shot him as he tried to escape. Boko Haram returned to my house, opened all the doors, and then they left. I don't think anyone lives in my village now.”



Children at the IDP camp

### Rachel, aged 15

“My parents died when I was small. My brother, Abdul, was sick and taken to Lagos to live with my grandmother, while I stayed in Biu. When Boko Haram entered our state, they tried to fix bombs to people but they were intercepted. Then they came to burn our houses and churches. They



tried to burn my church but it only burned the carpet. I saw them take off people's heads and place them on their back. We ran and hid in the soldiers' barracks. My auntie was killed."

**Patience, aged 13**

"My father was in the military, among the army fighting Boko Haram in Biu, Borno State. Meanwhile my mother was invited to join a secret cult, which she resisted, but sadly died of natural causes. Boko Haram attacked our three villages: Dambuwa, Gwoza and Dabro. They burned our homes. Once they had killed people, they would chop off their heads and place it on their chest."

**Juliet, 15**

"My mother was sick but my father didn't have enough money to repair his car and take her to hospital. He eventually went east to get help, but on his way back, the car caught fire and he died. With my mother still very sick, the Fulani herdsmen came. They killed four people and burned the whole village (called Supp, in Plateau State under Riyom). I ran away and moved in with my auntie. There were 1000 people in the village. No one lives there now. People are too scared to return. They are scared of the Fulani people."



Goodness, David and Abednego bear scars from the attacks

### Christiana, aged 10

“My father died in an accident and my mother died giving birth to my younger brother. So we went to my grandmother’s house in Wuba, Borno State – the only Christian home in the village. Boko Haram attacked our house and demanded to see dad. We explained he was dead so they asked: ‘Who is taking care of you?’ My older brother then called my grandfather to come. They shot my grandfather in the stomach and he didn't die. Then they shot him in the head and he died. They broke down the door and entered, ransacked the house and left.”

### Elisha, aged 16

“Boko Haram came to my locality in Borno state and declared that everyone must accept the Islamic faith. My mum and dad submitted but I refused, so I left my family home and moved to another locality. Boko Haram came again, shooting at people, trapping them inside, visiting one building at a time. I escaped through the backyard and ran to another house, hiding under a bed amongst clothes for 24 hours. The gunmen were singling out young boys, so I disguised myself as a girl. As I escaped, I saw one body where the head had been cut by a machete and the brain removed.

“After three days without food and drink, I sought refuge in a Muslim woman’s home. But when we encountered Boko Haram again, they tried to force me to convert, at one stage pointing a gun to my head. Thankfully, God intervened.”

### Omar, aged 15

“I remember people in my neighbourhood who would go out and kill at night. They were members of Boko Haram. One of them once asked my sister to go out with him. When my older brother tried to protect her, he was stabbed to death. She was later kidnapped and forced to accept Islam.

“That same night we heard the sound of gunshots. My family knew it was time to run and, although my mother

stayed behind, knowing that Boko Haram were searching for men, my father left for another locality. When he encountered Boko Haram, they butchered him.”

**Goodness (9), David (6) and Abednego (14)**

“The Fulani came to our village at night. The dogs were barking. There were torches on our house. Our mother and father were outside. They shot our father in the legs. They shot him again in the head. Our mother was screaming: ‘He is dead! He is dead!’ She ran to another house with our little brother. The Fulani came into our room and started cutting us. They shot David in the tummy and he fell down. They thought we were dead. Neighbours found us and took us to the hospital. Our mother was safe. She brought us here.”

**Richard, aged 15**

“It was 2011. I can’t remember the month. Our family was eating one night, my father, my mother and three children. My father went outside to use the toilet and he didn’t come back. He was attacked by Fulani. They cut off his hand. He was killed.”

# The political landscape

## Sharia Bill

Sharia courts exist in many parts of Nigeria. They currently have jurisdiction over a range of personal matters, including marriage, the custody of children and inheritance. In these cases, the parties to a dispute must be Muslims and must have requested that the court hears the case in accordance with Islamic personal law.

Any Muslim who opposes a judgment can appeal to their state's Sharia Court of Appeal within three months. The case can then be taken to the (secular) Federal Court of Appeal<sup>2</sup> and, if deemed necessary, to the Supreme Court.

However, a new Bill has been introduced to increase the jurisdiction of the Sharia Court of Appeal.<sup>3</sup> If it passes, such forums will be able to rule on criminal matters.

The Bill has completed its First Reading – a brief formality – in the House of Representatives. As a constitutional

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<sup>2</sup> The subject of the appeal must fall within the jurisdiction originally conferred on it by the constitution, i.e. matters relating to Islamic personal law where all the parties to the dispute are Muslims.

<sup>3</sup> A Bill for an Act to alter Section 262 and 277 of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 to increase the jurisdiction of the Sharia Court of Appeal of the Federal Capital Territory and Sharia Court of Appeal of the state by including criminal matters and Hudud and Qisas and for other related matters.

matter, it has moved straight to Committee Stage, which includes consultation with the Nigerian people. Recommendations from the Constitutional Review Committee will then be presented to the House, where a debate and vote will take place.

In order for the Bill to be enacted, it must pass with a two-thirds majority in both Houses, and with 24/36 state support. While we understand it is unlikely to succeed on this occasion, by creating publicity around the issue, it may affect legislation indirectly.

### **The Grazing Reserve Commission**

A separate Bill has been introduced to curb violent clashes between herdsmen and farmers.<sup>4</sup> If passed, it would create a National Grazing Reserve Commission with the power to establish at least one cattle reserve in each state.

However, it has been widely criticised for undermining the farmers whose land will be taken. The Stefanos Foundation said: “The Bill protects herdsmen over farmers. Land owners will not be able to sue except with permission from the Attorney General of the Federation. In essence, the government are authenticating aggressive land grabbing and enforcing abandonment, particularly where the Commission is given powers to take land anywhere it deems fit. It is not practical, nor fair”.

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<sup>4</sup> The National Grazing Reserve (Establishment) Bill 2016

# Conclusions

## **Accountability**

The Nigerian administration should be commended for taking steps to counter the Boko Haram insurgency. However, it remains clear that the national and cross-border military deployment – supported by the Civilian Joint Task Force, mercenaries, local hunters and vigilantes – has not been able to eradicate the group.

Even where advancements have succeeded in recapturing villages, there are serious concerns that Boko Haram militants have not been contained, and have simply dispersed.

It may therefore be necessary for an independent body to verify the true impact of Government efforts, including a thorough assessment of the scattering of militants.

## **Rehabilitation**

The insurgency is estimated to have affected about 5 million people, including more than 2.2 million Nigerians who are internally displaced. Adequate arrangements must be made for their security and rehabilitation.

Last month, 21 of the Chibok schoolgirls kidnapped in 2014 by Boko Haram were freed. We understand that they are

now in care of the Murtala Muhammed Foundation, which has reportedly attempted to interview the parents of each of the girls. However, we know of one father who has been unable to get access to his daughter. Although she has been freed by Boko Haram, he does not know where she is.

## **Reconciliation**

We visited two reconciliation projects: a Christian school in Bauchi, attended by 250 students, 80% of whom are Muslim; and a crafts group in Plateau, attended by 30-40 Muslim and Christian women.



Reconciliation project in Plateau with local Muslims and Christians



Such initiatives may seem unsubstantial, but in a context of terror and division, they provide local communities with practical incentives to develop skills and build friendships.

Although the UK Government has contributed £39 million to Nigeria's Stability and Reconciliation Programme, we heard that central funds do not always reach local Christian projects. There is a risk that vulnerable communities are relying too heavily on individual volunteers and churches.

### **Religious freedom**

The provision for freedom of worship and association is enshrined in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

However, the Nigerian Government has been accused of only occasionally investigating or prosecuting those responsible for abusing religious freedom. One MP told us: "Even if the authorities find those who hack children, they will be released the very next day." We heard many reports of state and local governments discriminating against members of the Christian community.

What is more, there are concerns that intervention agencies, such as the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) are failing to recognise Christian majority IDP camps.

## **Media**

Islamist terrorism in Nigeria is an emergency that is woefully underreported. The BBC Hausa service has been heavily criticised for promulgating a biased narrative. And western media consistently dismisses pre-planned, religiously-motivated attacks as 'ethnic riots', 'an indigenous problem', or 'tribal clashes'. Such reporting may be more palatable, but it fails to characterise the crisis in its entirety.