

Escalation of attacks against Christians in northern Nigeria

Briefing report, February 2018

Summary

In December 2017, dozens of Christians in Northern Nigeria were killed by Nigerian Government air attacks. Witnesses described helicopters and jets bombing houses and targeting civilians.

The air raids took place as villagers were also being attacked by Islamist Fulani herdsmen. According to human rights group Amnesty International, 86 people were killed, with many more seriously injured. They spoke to 15 witnesses, concluding:

“As the herdsmen shot people and torched homes, and the air raid resulted in fire, it was not possible to establish how much of the death and destruction was a direct result of the air attacks or attributable to the attack by herdsmen.

“Witnesses involved in the identification and burial of the victims said that 51 had gunshot or machete wounds, while the remaining 35 died as a result of the airstrikes.”

Witness statements

Hassan John, one of our partners in Nigeria, told us:

“I have spoken to so many witnesses who confirmed the report by Amnesty International. The situation is so tragic and what is most disappointing is the army, rather than admitting error, make the poor communities feel like they are liars in addition to their pains.”

Dawson Tufano, a retired judge from Dong village, said the Fulani Herdsmen came in large numbers chanting “Allahu Akbar”:

“While our local vigilantes were in a fierce battle with the herdsmen, aircraft came from nowhere and started throwing bombs on our villages, abetting the herdsmen to kill several people, while many others were injured as houses and properties were completely razed due to the Air Force bombings.”

A farmer who witnessed the bombardment said:

“The helicopter and the jet started releasing bombs. Houses started burning. Children started running for their lives. Mothers packed up their children and escaped with them. We men were unable to fight back and we started running too. This jet burnt our houses and properties to ashes.”

The Adamawa State Chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria, in a statement said, ten churches were targeted and destroyed in the attack, “to discourage Christianity and to silence Christians from free religious practice.”

Statement from the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria

“Violent attacks by unscrupulous persons, among whom are terrorists masquerading as herdsmen, have led to a near civil war situation in many parts of the country.

“We are saddened that, repeatedly, innocent citizens in different communities across the nation are brutally attacked and their sources of livelihood mindlessly destroyed. Lives are wasted and property, worth billions of Naira, including places of worship, schools, hospitals and business enterprises, are torched and turned to ashes.

“We are still more saddened by the recent massacre of unarmed citizens by these terrorists in some communities in Benue, Adamawa, Kaduna and Taraba states which has caused national shock, grief and outcry.

“The silence of the federal government in the wake of these horrifying attacks is, to say the least, shocking. There is a feeling of helplessness among the people and the danger that some people may begin to take laws into their hands.

“We, therefore, earnestly urge the government to take very seriously its primary responsibility of protecting the lives and property of its citizens and ensure that such mindless killings do not recur. Herdsmen may be under pressure to save their livestock and economy but this is never to be done at the expense of other people’s lives and means of livelihood.”

For full statement, see: <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/02/act-now-nigeria-siege-catholic-bishops-tell-buhari/>

Statement from Osai Ojigho, Director, Amnesty International Nigeria

“The government must totally overturn its response to these deadly clashes to avoid this crisis getting out of control. They need to investigate and bring suspects to justice.

“Hundreds of people lost their lives last year, and the government is still not doing enough to protect communities from these violent clashes. Worse, the killers are getting away with murder.

“In some cases where the Nigerian security agencies did respond to communal violence, they used excessive or unlawful force resulting in even more deaths and destruction.”

**Baroness Cox, CEO, Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART)
caroline.cox@hart-uk.org; carolincox1@outlook.com**