

## NIGERIA

Total population: 186.99 million

Religions: Christian, 46.3%; Muslim, 46%; Traditional, 7.4%; Other, 0.3%

Christian Population: 86.5 million<sup>1</sup>

When, in May 2017, 82 girls, most of them Christians, were released three years after their abduction from Chibok, northern Nigeria, some sections of the media declared that the tide was turning in the battle against home-grown Islamist terror group Boko Haram. But, while the media referred to the release as “a victory” for Nigeria’s President Muhammadu Buhari,<sup>2</sup> concerns persisted about the threat from militant extremists, particularly in the north of the country. In spite of the Nigerian military’s efforts to push back Boko Haram, the Islamists’ ongoing attacks on Christians and the increased potency of other militants’ violence meant that the outlook for the Church was increasingly uncertain.

By summer 2017, the toll of death and destruction carried out by Islamist groups against Christians was becoming fully apparent. In March 2017, an Aid to the Church in Need delegation flew into Maiduguri, capital of the worst-affected state, Borno. ACN were told that 1.8 million people in the state had been displaced as a result of the Boko Haram conflict. They also learned that 5,000 women were now widows and 15,000 children had become orphans. There was damage to 200 churches and chapels, 35 presbyteries and parish centres. In total, 26 million people in the region had been affected by Boko Haram.<sup>3</sup>

With Boko Haram allegedly responsible for the bulk of the violence, the evidence indisputably shows that, during the period under review, the Islamists held firm to their declared aim: “The Nigerian state and Christians are our enemies and we will be launching attacks on the Nigerian state and its security apparatus as well as churches until we achieve our goal of establishing an Islamic state...”<sup>4</sup> It followed a March 2012 Boko Haram declaration of a “war on Christians” aimed at eliminating them from parts of the country: “We will create so much effort to have an Islamic state that Christians will not be able to stay.” Having sought to eliminate Christianity from the region, it can clearly be indicated that Boko Haram is guilty of genocide in parts of northern Nigeria, warnings of which were made by Catholic clergy as far back as 2014.<sup>5</sup> While the government had, at the time of writing, succeeded in wresting Maiduguri from the control of Boko Haram, the threat had by no means passed, with the city falling victim to repeated suicide attacks.

During their spring 2017 visit to northern Nigeria, the Aid to the Church in Need delegation was handed a dossier from Church leaders showing that in the Diocese of Kafanchan, southern Kaduna, 988 people had been killed since 2011. The report also showed that over that same period 71 mostly Christian-majority villages had been destroyed, as well as 2,712 homes and 20 churches. They heard that the diocese had been targeted by Fulani herdsman, Islamist fighters described as forming a “sister organisation”<sup>6</sup> to Boko Haram. After late 2016, there was an upsurge of Fulani violence against Christians in the diocese. The attacks

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<sup>1</sup> Brian J. Grim, Todd M. Johnson, Vegard Skirbekk and Gina A. Zurlo (ed.s), *Yearbook of International Religious Demography 2017* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, 07/05/17 <[https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/07/world/africa/nigeria-chibok-boko-haram-.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/07/world/africa/nigeria-chibok-boko-haram-.html?_r=0)>

<sup>3</sup> Maria Lozano, Report on ACN Communication Trip to Nigeria, March 2017

<sup>4</sup> *Osun Defender*, 11/06/12 <<http://www.osundefender.com/?p=32210>>; *Christian Post*, 14/6/12 <<http://www.christianpost.com/news/boko-haram-explains-attacking-christians-desire-for-an-islamic-nigeria-76669/>>; *CNN*, 09/08/14 <<http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/08/opinion/gingrich-isis-boko-haram-hamas/index.html>>

<sup>5</sup> *The Tablet*, 02/07/14 <<http://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/940/0/boko-haram-engaged-in-genocide-against-christians-in-northern-nigeria-as-attacks-killings-and-abductions-continue>>

<sup>6</sup> ACN interview with Catholic Bishop Joseph Bagobiri of Kafanchan, northern Nigeria, March 2017; ACN (UK) News, 27/04/17 <<http://acnuk.org/news/nigeria-is-the-government-complicit-in-the-supply-of-arms-to-islamists/>>

included the April 2017 massacre of 12 people, 10 of them Catholics, killed just moments before an Easter Vigil service got underway outside a church in the south of Kaduna State. While not necessarily sharing Boko Haram's vision of a Muslim caliphate in northern Nigeria, the evidence suggests the Fulani herdsmen are as committed as the Daesh (ISIS) – affiliates to eliminating Christians in a region where the Church has grown fast. Church leaders state that in a region which a century ago had very few Christians, the faithful are now 35 percent of the population.<sup>7</sup> The sudden explosion of Fulani-related violence shows the herdsmen's capacity to threaten the Christian presence at a fundamental level.

Nigeria's climate of conflict and tension has arisen out of divisions in a society where religion has long since been a source of at best lively debate and at other times a cause of explosive violence. Africa's most populous nation is equally divided between Muslims and Christians and much debate persists as to which is in the majority. Christians predominate in the south – with a high proportion of Catholics in Igbo settlement areas – and the north is predominantly Muslim. Nigeria's constitutional status is a federal republic based on the model of the United States of America but in the north the constitutional position was complicated by the introduction of Islamic *Shari'a* law in the year 2000. Islamist violence in Nigeria is said to have decreased since May 2015 when Buhari, a Muslim, became President in accordance with law which decrees that the holder of the office alternates between the country's two major religions. The prospect of a Christian once again assuming the Presidency points to the threat of a resumption of violence, as happened during Goodluck Jonathan's crisis-filled period in office, which ended in 2015.

Whoever does take over from Buhari, the chances are that the Boko Haram threat will by then have subsided. While the full impact of the militants' violence of recent years has only now become fully apparent, the indications are that the threat of Boko Haram and similar groups is in decline. Analysts, however, consistently allege that the Boko Haram threat remains potent because of alleged prevarication by the government in fighting the militants. Stating that the Nigerian federal authorities had "failed to implement effective strategies" to counter Boko Haram, in 2017 the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom praised the state military for reclaiming land from the Islamists before adding that "the government's non-military efforts to stop [the jihadi group] remain nascent"<sup>8</sup>. Bishop Bagobiri went further to accuse the government of collusion with Boko Haram and Fulani fighters. In an Aid to the Church in Need interview in spring 2017, he stated: "Given the sophisticated nature of the weapons used in the [Islamists'] operations, it is suspected that their kin in government and the military are able to supply these arms to them."<sup>9</sup> Stating that the Fulani had responsibility for customs, immigration and control over the internal affairs ministry, the bishop concluded: "It is easy to bring dangerous weapons through our borders, with no-one to prevent this."

In conclusion then, while the Islamist threat to Christians peaked before the reporting cycle, the continuing Boko Haram violence, the renewed potency of the Fulani and the impact of mass migration has put the Church at greater risk. This point is highlighted by reports of the use of more sophisticated weaponry and training.<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding the threat, in areas where the government had clearly succeeded in rooting out the jihadi threat, bishops and other Church leaders were doing everything possible to resettle the people back in their homelands, provided adequate security is in place.

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<sup>7</sup> ACN interview with Catholic Bishop Joseph Bagobiri of Kafanchan, northern Nigeria, March 2017

<sup>8</sup> USCIRF 2017 Report, p.1 <<http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Nigeria.2017.pdf>>

<sup>9</sup> ACN (UK) News, 27/04/17 <<http://acnuk.org/news/nigeria-is-the-government-complicit-in-the-supply-of-arms-to-islamists>>

<sup>10</sup> Voice of the Martyrs (Canada), 24/11/16 <<https://www.vomcanada.com/ng-2016-11-24.htm>>

## Selected incidents

**September 2015:** Offering amnesty to Boko Haram fighters could result in most of the terror group's forces laying down their weapons, according to Cardinal John Onaiyekan, Archbishop of Abuja. In an interview in New York with Aid to the Church in Need, Cardinal Onaiyekan said that up to 80 percent of Boko Haram fighters did not share the terror group's Islamist ideology and were therefore likely to respond to the chance to lay down their weapons and walk away. Cardinal Onaiyekan said: "More people are in Boko Haram because they were drafted and had no choice. Those who would espouse the theology of Boko Haram are not that many. It means that – of those – up to 70 or 80 percent will want to come out."<sup>11</sup>

**January 2016:** Father Patrick Tor Alumiki, communications officer for the Archdiocese of Abuja, underlined the needs of families displaced by Boko Haram, indicating that the Islamist militants were now focusing attacks on small villages in preference to cities. It followed Boko Haram's attack on Dalori village in which around 90 people died – including children, who were burnt alive. Father Tor Alumiki said: "Nigeria really feels abandoned at this moment. The government is focused solely on Boko Haram – but there are also the many people who are fleeing from Boko Haram. That is why we need to build up camps, [and] take care of their health... We need international attention." As a result of the Boko Haram attacks, there are now 2.5 million displaced people in Nigeria.<sup>12</sup>

**March 2016:** Christians in Kaduna mourned the Rev Iliya Anto, one of three men abducted by armed men as they travelled along the Kaduna-Abuja Expressway to clear a piece of land on which to build a seminary. The Rev Anto, the Rev Emmanuel Dzigau and the Rev Yakubu Dzarma, all ministers in the United Church of Christ in Nigeria, were abducted on 22<sup>nd</sup> March. The kidnappers subsequently contacted Church sources telling them to go to a designated location to find the clergy. But when the Christians went there, the abductees could not be found. The kidnappers said afterwards that the Church authorities had reneged on the deal because they had sent too many people. The Rev Anto's decaying body was found in the bush on 30<sup>th</sup> March and that same evening the two other clergy were freed and taken to hospital. It is unclear if a ransom was paid to secure their release.<sup>13</sup>

**November 2016:** On the evening of 13<sup>th</sup> November 2016 Fulani herdsmen, armed with guns, machetes and explosives, attacked five villages in the Kauri local government area of Kaduna State, mostly populated by Christians. 45 civilians were reported dead, mostly elderly people, women and children. Dozens of others were injured and thousands more were displaced. 120 churches, including eight house churches, were torched. In response, Church leaders reiterated calls for more security, including the establishment of a military base in southern Kaduna State.<sup>14</sup>

**December 2016:** 11 people were killed on Christmas Eve when Fulani herdsmen dressed in military uniform attacked the village of Goska in Kaduna State. The attack, which left several houses razed to the ground, took place in spite of a curfew. Reports stated that the act of violence was timed to coincide with Christmas festivities. Governor Nasir Ahmad El-Rufai condemned the attack, describing it as inhumane.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> ACN (UK) News, 22/09/15

<sup>12</sup> Vatican Radio, 02/02/16

<sup>13</sup> Christian Solidary Worldwide, 01/04/16 <<http://www.csw.org.uk/2016/04/01/news/3044/article.htm>>

<sup>14</sup> Voice of the Martyrs (Canada), 24/11/16 <<https://www.vomcanada.com/ng-2016-11-24.htm>>

<sup>15</sup> *The Nation*, 26/12/16 <<http://thenationonlineng.net/bloody-christmas-10-killed-fresh-attack-kaduna/>>; Elanza News, 29/12/16 <<http://www.elanzanews.com/southern-kaduna-youth-donates-to-goska-victims>>

**February 2017:** At least 21 people were killed when armed Fulani herdsmen carried out raids on Christian-majority communities in Kaduna in attacks. According to reports, the first attack took place on the evening of 19<sup>th</sup> February when hundreds of militia descended on Bakin Kogi in southern Kaduna, setting fire to houses. At least seven people were killed and scores of others were injured. Pictures appeared to show the beheaded corpses of young men. Early the next morning, Fulani gunmen killed 14 people in simultaneous attacks on Mifi and Ashim villages. Women and children were among the victims, who were aged between eight and 73. Peace was restored only after police and military reportedly defeated the attackers in a gun battle.<sup>16</sup>

**March 2017:** An Aid to the Church in Need delegation to Nigeria visited communities traumatised by the Boko Haram insurgency. The trip, which included visits to Maiduguri, Kafanchan, Kaduna and Jos, revealed the extent to which the Christian community had suffered death, displacement and desecration of churches, as well as significant loss of church infrastructure. The ACN team met victims of persecution, including young women and others raped, whipped, and evicted from their homes. The delegation also heard accounts of people killed for their faith. The trip, which also took in visits to emergency aid programmes and pastoral support initiatives funded by Aid to the Church in Need, revealed that vocations to the priesthood and religious life remained high amid a shortage of churches large enough for growing congregations.<sup>17</sup>

**April 2017:** Fulani fighters were accused of carrying out an attack on Christians gathering for an Easter Vigil service outside a church in Asso village, southern Kaduna State. 12 people died, including 10 Christians. Catholic Bishop Joseph Bagobiri of Kafanchan, told Aid to the Church in Need afterwards that in spite of the many sightings of the perpetrators, no arrests had been made.<sup>18</sup>

**May 2017:** Boko Haram set free 82 of the 250 girls still in captivity following their abduction from a school in Chibok, northern Nigeria, in April 2014. Including the girls previously released, it brought the total number released by the jihadists to 105. A statement on behalf of Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari reported that the release was part of an exchange deal in which the regime agreed to the release of a number of Boko Haram fighters held by the Nigerian authorities. Most of the abducted Chibok girls are Christians who had been attending a school the like of which are despised by Boko Haram, whose name means 'Western Education is forbidden'.<sup>19</sup>

**June 2017:** Sixteen Muslim youth organisations in northern Nigeria gave Christians from the southern Igbo tribe a three-month deadline to leave the region. The deadline was announced in a statement by Mallam Abdulazeez Suleiman, the Muslim youth organisations' spokesman. He was speaking in response to a protest by the Indigenous People of Biafra, a local group in eastern Nigeria, which closed businesses and shops on 30<sup>th</sup> May 2017 as part of its bid for independence. Mr Abdulazeez said: "This latest action, which amounts to a brutal encroachment on the rights of those termed as non-indigenous people, are downright unacceptable and shall not be tolerated." He called on the federal government "to facilitate the final dissolution of this hopeless union" and threatened that the Muslim youth would "commence... visible actions to prove to the whole world that we are no longer part of any federal union [involving] the Igbo." The Rev Joseph Hayab, of the Christian Association of

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<sup>16</sup> Christian Solidary Worldwide, 21/02/17 <<http://www.csw.org.uk/2017/02/21/news/3462/article.htm>>

<sup>17</sup> John Newton, *Nigeria: The Church under Attack*, (Aid to the Church in Need (UK), May 2017) <[http://acnuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/322671-ACN-1705-Nigeria-Report\\_v5-FINAL.pdf](http://acnuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/322671-ACN-1705-Nigeria-Report_v5-FINAL.pdf)>

<sup>18</sup> ACN (UK) News, 27/04/17 <<http://acnuk.org/news/nigeria-is-the-government-complicit-in-the-supply-of-arms-to-islamists>>

<sup>19</sup> Global Christians News, 07/05/17 <<https://www.globalchristiannews.org/article/boko-haram-released-82-chibok-school-girls-in-a-prisoner-swap/>>

Nigeria, described the so-called “eviction notice” as “evil and a threat to national security and unity”.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Global Christian News, 08/06/17 <<https://www.globalchristiannews.org/article/muslim-youth-call-for-eviction-of-christian-igbo-tribe-in-northern-nigeria/>>