

NIGERIA: Overview of recent violence

I. Background to Boko Haram

Boko Haram is not a recent phenomenon. The group initially came to prominence in 2003. At the time the group alternatively called itself *Sunna Wal Jamma* or “the Taliban”, and its leader, Mohammed Yusuf, styled himself as Mullah Omar. The group consisted of former university students and disaffected scions of wealthy northern families, and was thought at that time to be around 200 strong. In late 2003, it began a brief armed uprising in Yobe State in north-east Nigeria by issuing pamphlets declaring its determination to make Nigeria a Muslim State. Then the young militants proceeded to invade Kanamma and Geidam Local Government Areas (LGAs) and destroy Kanamma police station, killing a policeman and carting off weapons while chanting *Allah u Akbar* – God is great. Next, they marched to the town centre, took over a primary school, renamed it “Afghanistan”, hoisted their own flag and declared a *jihad* against Christians and the Nigerian Federal Government. These aims have not changed. The group went on to cause havoc in several towns and villages, including the state capital Damaturu, occasioning the displacement of around 10,000 people. Federal forces eventually crushed the uprising and arrested several members of the group, four of whom were killed while allegedly attempting to escape from Damaturu prison.

In September 2004, the group murdered over a dozen Christians during raids on the towns of Bama and Gwoza in Borno State, situated in the north-east close to the border with Cameroon. Around 60 sect members were also reported to have attacked police stations in the area, killing four policemen. As a joint police and army force launched an operation against them, the group took seven people hostage, forcing them to act as porters as they retreated over the Mandara hills and into neighbouring Cameroon. One of the hostages escaped and was interviewed by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) at that time, while two are known to have been murdered.¹

Despite such notorious activities, by the time the group once again made headlines, it had not only set up a headquarters in the Borno State capital, Maiduguri, but had also established its own mosques in several northern states. It would therefore appear that the group, which was by then known locally as Boko Haram (Western education is forbidden), had come to some form of accommodation with northern authorities. However, by July 2009 it became clear that any peace that had been brokered was unraveling when the group launched coordinated attacks in Bauchi, Yobe, Kano and Borno States, killing at least 1,000 people. Once again a joint security force was mustered, and the group was driven back to its stronghold in Maiduguri’s Railway suburb. Although at the time Boko Haram claimed their quarrel was with state officials who were mistreating its adherents and assured Christians in the area they would be safe, Boko Haram proceeded to murder three pastors, torch over twenty churches, destroy numerous Christian-owned businesses and hold over 100 Christians hostage at its headquarters for use as human shields against the encircling federal forces. Surviving hostages informed CSW-UK that male hostages were either forcibly converted or beheaded, while females were subjected to hard labour upon refusing to convert.²

It was hoped that Boko Haram would rapidly go into decline following the siege and destruction of its Maiduguri headquarters, and the controversial extra-judicial killing of its leader soon thereafter. However, an ambush on a federal prison in Bauchi State on 8 September 2010 that destroyed the premises and freed 700 inmates, including around 100 suspected Boko Haram members, announced

¹ CSW Press Release <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=news&id=369> and briefing paper, September and October 2004 respectively

² CSW Visit Report to Nigeria, 2009

the group's return. This was followed in December by bombings in Jos, capital of predominantly Christian Plateau State, which killed over 30 people and injured around 28.

Since its return Boko Haram has adopted fresh and increasingly sophisticated tactics, including hit and run drive-by murders of Christians, Muslim officials, Imams and individuals that it deems have betrayed or oppose it and even suicide bombings which were previously unheard of in Nigeria, such as the high-profile destruction in August 2011 of the UN headquarters in Abuja. Moreover, purported spokesmen for the group have claimed that the group is now affiliated with Somalia's al Shabaab and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).³ In February 2010, AQIM had offered to train and supply Nigerian Muslims, "including support and men, weapons, ammunitions and equipment."⁴

To further complicate matters, during 2011, Boko Haram was reported to have split into three factions. One faction is alleged to be more moderate, seeking an end to the violence; another is reportedly seeking a peace agreement with rewards similar to those offered to militants in the Niger Delta. The most hard-line faction utterly rejects negotiations, and continues to seek the implementation of strict Shari'a law throughout the ethnically and religiously diverse nation.

2. Violence during Christmas 2011

Over 40 people are thought to have died in a series of Christmas Day bomb and gun attacks by Boko Haram that targeted churches and members of the security services in Niger, Plateau, Yobe, Adamawa and Borno States.

The majority of fatalities occurred at St Theresa's Catholic Church in Madalla, Niger State, where bombers in a vehicle hurled explosives at the congregation at the end of the mass. Local Sources told Christian Solidarity Worldwide-Nigeria (CSW-N) that the priest had asked parishioners to stay a little longer for Christmas souvenirs. Those who did not remain for the ceremony as they were in a rush to leave were caught up in the blast.

At least 35 people died in the Madalla bombing, with scores more suffering various degrees of injury, some potentially fatal. CSW-N was informed that in several cases the blast claimed entire families, some of whom were burnt beyond recognition in their cars. In the case of one family, the sole survivor was a thirteen year-old girl called Chidinma, who had not attended church that day. There is speculation that as security has been tight in Abuja, Madalla and other satellite towns to the capital such as Suleja, where the authorities uncovered a Boko Haram cell and a bomb-making facility in 2011, may have been identified by the group as alternative soft targets.

The next explosions targeted a Mountain of Fire Ministries church in Murtala Mohammad Way in the Plateau State capital, Jos. The bombers were on foot because the state government had temporarily banned the use of unregistered motorcycles for this very reason. The first device destroyed a large building outside the church. However, a police patrol was passing by just as the bombers threw the second, which hit a wall and destroyed a few cars. Four culprits, reportedly Muslims from the Gangare area, were apprehended following a fire fight in which a policeman was injured and later died. There were no other casualties reported, and two more locally made explosives were allegedly recovered nearby and disarmed.

³ "Boko Haram claims al Qaeda links", <http://www.news24.com/Africa/News/Boko-Haram-claims-al-Qaeda-links-20111124>; Boko Haram seen linked to other terrorist groups, <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/africa/west/Boko-Haram-Seen-Linked-to-Other-African-Terror-Groups--136260858.html>

⁴ See AQIM's statement of 2/2010 <http://www.globalterroralert.com/images/documents/pdf/0210/aqim-the-annihilation-muslims-in-nigeria.pdf>

Multiple explosions were reported next from Damaturu in Yobe State, where fighting between security forces and Boko Haram had claimed over 60 lives earlier in the same week. Most significantly, a suicide bomber detonated a car bomb outside the offices of the State Security Service (SSS), killing three SSS men. In a subsequent attack on a church in Gadaka, a town approximately 155 km west of Damaturu, gunmen set ablaze five cars as worshippers fled, but no lives were reported lost.

A bomb also exploded at a hotel in Mubi in Adamawa State injuring one person; however, other bombs planted around three churches in the town were reportedly disarmed. In the Wasin Umurari area of Maiduguri, capital of Borno State, six people died in an attack launched by suspected Boko Haram gunmen.⁵

Responses to Christmas Day violence

In response to the Christmas Day bombings, the Nigerian Government temporarily closed its borders with Chad, Niger and Cameroon, and instituted a state of emergency in the most violence-prone areas of Plateau, Yobe, Borno and Niger States.

Meanwhile, angered by the continuous killings of members of their tribes in the north, militia groups in the Niger Delta reiterated a threat initially issued on 11 December to henceforth respond in kind to the killing of Niger Deltans, and also warned northerners to leave the area. Subsequently, on 28 December, men on a motorcycle are reported to have thrown what was described as a low capacity bomb at an Islamic school in Sapele in Delta State, injuring around six children.⁶

In response Boko Haram gave Christians and southerners a three-day deadline to leave the north, which expired on 4 January, and advised northerners in the south to return to their traditional areas. On the evening of Wednesday 4 January Boko Haram launched attacks in three northern states, hours after the expiry of its deadline for Christians to leave. In the Yobe State capital Damaturu, gunmen attacked a Christian compound in Gashu'a Road, killing two people and wounding several others. The militia also murdered the head of Pompomari Ward and bombed a beer parlour in an area known locally as Kandahar. In Borno State, suspected Boko Haram gunmen shot and killed the head of Shehuri Ward in Maiduguri. However, two bombs that exploded close to the customs office claimed no casualties. In Jigawa State, a teenage girl died in crossfire when dozens of suspected Boko Haram gunmen attacked a police station in Birniwa local council, wounding a policeman and allegedly planting a bomb that was later disarmed. Violence continued the following evening, as gunmen attacked a meeting at a Deeper Life church in the Gombe State capital, killing six people, including the pastor's wife, and injuring several others.⁷

3. More recent violence

Yobe State

Since the Christmas violence, the situation in Yobe State has continued to deteriorate. Yobe is next to Borno State, where Boko Haram used to be headquartered, and where the majority of its violent activities occurred last year. It would appear that as security has tightened in Borno, Boko Haram has become increasingly active in Yobe.

CSW was informed that at around 3pm on Tuesday 10 January, eight men and a woman were killed by suspected Boko Haram gunmen in Potiskum Town. All nine were Christians. The group, which included a lecturer from Potiskum's Federal College of Education/Technical, four policemen and a

⁵ CSW press release, 26/12/2011 <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=press&id=1292>

⁶ "Unknown Attackers throw bomb at Arabic school in Sapele" <http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/unknown-attackers-throw-bomb-at-arabic-school-in-sapele/106003/>

⁷ CSW press release 6/1/2012 <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=press&id=1297>

young man employed by Jam'a Clinic, were in a bar in the Dorawa Ward when they were shot by gunmen who escaped on motorcycles. On the previous day, two Christians were also shot at by gunmen on a motorcycle in the Barracks area of Potiskum, but escaped injury by falling to the ground and playing dead.

On Wednesday 11 January, Boko Haram gunmen shot dead four Igbo Christian men in Potiskum. The four men were reportedly shot in a vehicle as they were migrating southwards to rejoin their families, who had already moved there to escape the violence. Previous attempts to join them had been hampered by the indefinite general strike called by Nigeria's Trade Unions to protest the government's removal of a fuel subsidy, which has brought the nation to a halt. On the same day, Boko Haram also threatened to attack Kukargadu and Dagare villages, both of which have a sizeable population of Christians who are from tribes that are indigenous to the area. Fortunately, extra security personnel were deployed to the villages, which were consequently kept safe, at least for that evening.

While Christians from southern tribes are returning to their original areas, the majority of Christians in Yobe are from indigenous tribes and have no other home, as is the case in other northern and central states. CSW was told, "We have our farmlands, houses and everything here. Our great, great, great grandparents were born here. It is our forefather's land, yet we are being left with the choice of relocating to a safer area until things improve, or staying here to die". Nevertheless people are reportedly fleeing Yobe en masse, relocating as far as they can. Those who cannot afford to go far live in fear of being discovered and killed. One source, who informed CSW he was assisting over 200 families of Indigenous Christians with relocation, said "if this continues unabated, in the next few months or weeks there may be no Christians in Yobe State. Though our houses, jobs and churches are here, we have no choice but to leave". CSW was informed that as a result of the unabated violence Potiskum's Christian population, including indigenous Christians, is now almost non-existent. For those who remain, there is also the terrible fear that any reprisals in the south will rebound badly on them. There are also reports of Hausa-Fulani Muslims fleeing the south, with indigenous Muslims in that area also beginning to voice concerns. The comment from another key Nigerian source on this phenomenon is particularly ominous: "This was the pattern before the civil war began. Northerners moving back home and southerners doing the same. We pray this does not degenerate to a civil or and religious war. Nigeria would be finished."

CSW was informed that Boko Haram has decided to change to house-to-house night attacks to circumvent the state of emergency imposed by President Jonathan, and had already scouted out the homes of Christians in Damaturu and Potiskum, and places where Christians may gather. One young man who fled the area on Sunday 8 January for a state in central Nigeria informed CSW that a Muslim friend had warned him to leave by that date, and had confirmed this change of tactic. It would therefore appear that Boko Haram members are known to the local Muslim community and are operating relatively freely. The same source added: "Boko Haram are people in the town – living there, and no one will expose them. It's as if they all support them". However, in several instances the silence could possibly be attributed to fear of a group that is gaining mythological notoriety, given Boko Haram's propensity for killing anyone it deems a traitor.

In conversations with CSW and CSW Nigeria (CSW-N), Christians in Yobe State also complained of an insufficient security presence in Potiskum, despite the imposition of the state of emergency. One said the lack of visible security was compounded by the fact that many policemen no longer wear uniforms since these mark them out as targets. "No one knows what will happen tonight because there is no security at all. People are just dying as if there is no government." Local sources also added that no official, including the state governor, had visited them to condole them, or had commented on their plight, and that the general strike to some extent plays into the hands of Boko Haram, since people are unable to escape the area due to the scarcity of fuel and public transport. In addition, the fear has been voiced by at least one commentator that the abrupt and possibly ill-timed removal of the subsidy, which occasioned the indefinite general strike and led to nationwide rallies

against the policy, may not only have dissipated the energies of the security services at a time of increased terrorist threat, but may also inadvertently bolster support for Boko Haram by creating greater disaffection in a region that voted almost overwhelmingly against the presidency of Goodluck Jonathan.⁸

During conversations with CSW, Christians in Potiskum urgently requested a ban on motorcycles in the area, as is the case in Maiduguri, and was the case in the Plateau State capital over Christmas, due to regular use of these vehicles by Boko Haram. They also pleaded for an urgent increase in security in the area. It has since been reported that more security operatives may now have been drafted there. In addition, a 24-hour curfew has been imposed in Yobe, and motorcycles are now banned. While constituting a welcome development with regard to ensuring greater safety, like the strike the curfew also engenders the added complication of hindering those who seek to escape to safer areas.

Further retaliation in the south

On 5 January, angry youths, in Sapele, Delta State, reportedly, attacked a local Hausa-Fulani community, injuring around 50 people in retaliation for the killing of southerners by Boko Haram. Local press sources reported further retaliatory attacks on 9 and 10 January in Benin City. These started on 9 January under cover of the general strike, and continued the following day, with neighbourhoods housing the Hausa Fulani tribe coming under attack. In addition, an Islamic school adjacent to the central mosque was burnt down along with a bus parked next to it. Local officials report five deaths and around 3,000 people displaced.⁹

In the Western press, such retaliation is being characterised as religious, mainly because statements issued by the National President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in the aftermath of the Madalla bombing for Christians to defend themselves by all necessary means have been interpreted and publicised as a literal call to arms, rather than a call for the Christian community to ensure its own protection in the absence of effective and adequate governmental measures.¹⁰ In reality, the issue in the south is more tribal. For well over a decade, people from southern Nigeria have been targeted in incidents of orchestrated religion-related violence occurring in the north. The most recent to occur prior to the upsurge in Boko Haram activity, took place in April 2010, when amongst other things, southern youths undertaking national services by assisting in electoral monitoring were killed in large numbers by assailants from the Hausa Fulani tribe who objected to the victory of President Goodluck Jonathan. Southerners and particularly the Igbo tribe of south-eastern Nigeria, have long been warning that the northerners do not have a monopoly on violence and that it was becoming difficult to repeatedly receive the mutilated remains of their kinsmen and women without taking action, especially when no one is ever held accountable for these deaths.

Militants in the Niger Delta speaking under the banner of the Joint Revolutionary Council had warned at the end of 2011 that they would no longer countenance attacks on their fellow tribesfolk. In a recent interview one of the key militants, Mujahid Dokubo-Asari, a Muslim who led a rebellion until a peace deal was concluded with the government in 2004, made it clear that the retaliation would be tribal, and not religiously based: "Anybody that wants to start any revolution in Goodluck's time, we the Ijaw will pull down that revolution."¹¹ Nevertheless, three of the targets for retaliatory action so far have been religious institutions, although some local sources postulate that attacks in late 2011 may have been undertaken by Boko Haram to provoke north-south strife. This is particularly felt to be the case with an initial event, where a Hausa-Fulani man was allegedly found alone in the mosque suffering from burn injuries to his hands.

⁸ Martin A. Ewi, Senior Researcher, Transnational Threats and International Crime, Pretoria Office "The Fuel Subsidy Crisis and its implications for the fight against Boko Haram in Nigeria" <http://www.the-african.org/blog/?p=687>

⁹ See <http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFJOE80A00T20120111>

¹⁰ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16458743>

¹¹ See <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/02/us-nigeria-insurgency-idUSTRE80100T20120102>

The Niger Delta militants view the recent upsurge in violent activity as an attempt by the north to undermine and derail the current presidency, and feel obligated to counter this, as President Jonathan is from their area. Moreover, Boko Haram also appears to target southerners whether or not they are Muslim. This may primarily be due to the fact that the group's membership is overwhelmingly Hausa-Fulani, and there is an element of tribal supremacy, with religion seemingly being viewed through tribal lenses. The Hausa-Fulani, who have been the common denominator in the overwhelming majority of incidents of religion-related violence that have occurred in northern and central Nigeria, generally conflate religion with tribe in each instance.

Adamawa State

The more recent retaliatory action in the south came after a week of violent events in Adamawa State, in which southerners were specifically targeted. Below is the chronology of events in Mubi Town in Adamawa State and its environs:

On Tuesday, 3 January, the Mubi weekly cattle market was raided by suspected Boko Haram gunmen who wounded several people and stole the day's sales.

On Thursday 5 January, the gunmen attacked the residence of a possible witness of the Tuesday raid who could have positively identified some of them, killing him and one other person who was with him.

On Friday 6 January, the gunmen attacked people who had gathered to mourn one of the victims of the Thursday attack, killing thirteen of them. On the same day, they attacked an Igbo Union Town Hall meeting, killing fourteen more people. Also on Friday, gunmen attacked the market of neighbouring town of Gombi, and at around 8pm, eight people were killed in a Jimeta township church during a worship service. Finally at about 9pm on 7 January, two bombs exploded in Mubi town.

Some observers feel there is also a nefarious political logic behind the attacks in Adamawa, a state which was not placed under the state of emergency, but which was placed curfew after these events. They speculate that the attacks may also be part of a strategy to unsettle the electorate prior to gubernatorial elections on 14 January. The fact that the Igbo tribe, the most economically influential non Hausa-Fulani tribe, was hit hardest is also seen as part of a strategy to alter electoral demographics by driving southerners and easterners away, and to seize control of the political economy.

Events in Kaduna, Zamfara and Niger States

In several instances, fuel subsidy removal protests have been used for alternative agendas. Not only have some of its more vocal supporters been leading members of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), the party whose failure to win the presidential elections sparked April's electoral violence, it has also been used in several northern states as cover for other grievances.

On 11 January, a fuel protest in Gusau, Zamfara State, degenerated into an attack on Ebenezer Baptist Church as rioters removed equipment and other valuables from the premises and set them on fire. A 24-hour curfew was imposed in Kaduna City and its environs yesterday, after Muslim youths went to the governor's official residence on Tuesday claiming they wanted to seize control. Then a 6am to 6pm curfew was imposed in Niger State after rioting broke out in the capital, Minna, and the governor's campaign headquarters was attacked.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Boko Haram is the latest and most virulent manifestation of a phenomenon that has been left unchecked for too long, namely religion-related violence in Nigeria's northern and central states.

The group is the logical outcome of the failure of the system of “Full Shari’a” to improve the lot of rank and file northern Muslims as they had hoped, and is symptomatic of a growing rejection of the northern power elite which never fully bought into it, but nevertheless introduced the system as a means of maintaining a power base following the advent of the democratic era and of a non-Muslim president after years in which northern generals controlled the country. Those who to some extent attribute dissatisfaction and religion-related violence in the north to a lack of development in comparison with the south fail to take into account the fact that for the majority of Nigeria’s 51 years of independence, it has been ruled by northerners who for the most part maintained a traditional system of patronage, rather than vigorously encouraging development and education in their region.

Given the threat to national unity engendered by heightening north-south tensions, the recent vow by Boko Haram’s leader to continue actions amounting to ethnic and religious cleansing¹²(ostensibly on the basis of retaliation), and increasing references by influential Nigerians to the possibility of another civil war,¹³ it is essential for the Nigerian Government to take decisive action. The increasingly international dimensions of this crisis, as epitomised by Boko Haram’s declared links with international terrorist networks, also necessitate that key nations possessing greater knowledge and capacity to tackle such networks offer urgent assistance the Nigerian government in this endeavour.

Neighbouring countries, such as Cameroon, Niger and Chad, must also be prevailed upon to provide assistance. At least since 2000, survivors of some attacks in Bauchi and Plateau States have spoken of the presence of militants from Chad, Niger or Cameroon amongst their attackers. It is worthwhile noting at this juncture that the approximately twenty million-strong Fulani tribe can be found in nineteen African countries, ranging from Senegal to the borders of Ethiopia, and familial/tribal/religious obligations constitute a strong pull-factor. Thus the Nigerian Government must not only tackle the issue of the nation’s porous borders in conjunction with the governments of these nations; it must also vigorously examine the immigration statuses of non-Nigerians in the north and ensure that sufficient security is deployed in every area that experiences or has experienced violence in order to protect and raise the confidence of its citizens. Nigerian forces deployed in these areas must also undertake regular house-to-house searches for potential terrorist cells or bomb-making facilities that are rigorous enough to uncover the guilty, but with a sensitivity that ensures that the innocent are unharmed. This has not always been the case, and heavy-handed policing tactics in Maiduguri and Damaturu have had the unfortunate effect of terrifying and, in some cases, alienating innocent members of the public.

Finally, it also vital that Nigeria seizes this opportunity to take decisive action to bring an end to prevailing impunity surrounding religion-related violence by ensuring justice is done and seen to be done. No effort must be spared in pursuing, capturing and prosecuting funders and perpetrators of this violence, no matter how highly placed they may be – and according to the president’s recent comments, some may be extremely highly and strategically positioned.¹⁴ This has rarely been the case in the past: the vast majority of those arrested for such violence have been quietly released once news of their crimes is no longer in the headlines, much to the distress and annoyance of survivors and friends and family of their victims, who are consistently denied justice, and eventually some take matters into their own hands, occasioning further lawlessness. In early December 2011, the government arrested a senator, Ali Ndume in connection with Boko Haram. This and any subsequent cases must be pursued to the fullest extent of the law. Impunity and lawlessness will only end when the rule of law is upheld in every instance and religion-related crimes are treated as crimes under the law, and are dealt with accordingly.

¹² “Boko Haram leader defends killings” <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/01/20121122529369976.html>

¹³ “State of the Nation: Soyinka, Achebe, Clark warn against another civil war” <http://ireports-ng.com/2012/01/08/state-of-the-nation-soyinka-achebe-clark-warn-against-another-civil-war/>

¹⁴ “President Goodluck Jonathan: Boko Haram members are in government” <http://news2.onlinenigeria.com/headlines/132479-president-goodluck-jonathan-boko-haram-members-are-in-government.html>