

Violence perpetrated by an armed group comprising members of the Fulani ethnic group (also known as the Fulani militia) has occurred since March 2010, when over 400 people died in coordinated night attacks on the villages of Dogo Nahawa, Ratsat and Zot¹ in Plateau State. In some instances, entire families were killed by the attackers, who woke the villagers from their sleep with gunfire and shouting, before setting homes on fire and attacking men, women and children, including babies. Many suffered severe machete wounds, and several bodies were decapitated.

The killings were widely described as being in reprisal for violence that had occurred in Kuru Karama, Plateau State, on 19 January 2010 that was widely reported, both locally and internationally, as a massacre by Christians of around 150 Muslim villagers. However, the non-Muslim village head of Kuru Karama who fled the violence, later confirmed that non-Muslims were among the casualties.²

The attacks on Dogo Nahawa, Ratsat and Zot essentially formed the blueprint for future militia attacks, which have occurred almost cyclically in states across central Nigeria, and which now occur in southern Nigeria. The violence has also contributed to a proliferation of small arms and the surge lawlessness that is currently afflicting communities in the northwest. While violence in central states is ethno-religious in nature and involves land grabbing through forced displacement, areas in the northwest which are experiencing extortion and murder are largely Muslim farming communities of Hausa ethnicity, although the plight of the equally vulnerable minority Christian areas is eclipsed by the magnitude of attacks on the majority religious community.

Since 2015 Nigeria has witnessed a spike in militia violence that has largely gone unchecked, Insecurity is now rampant throughout the nation. For example on 29 January 2024, two traditional rulers were killed in the southern state of Ekiti and a third escaped after their vehicles were intercepted by gunmen of Fulani ethnicity along the Oke-Ako road in Ikole Local Government Area (LGA), as they returned from a security meeting.³ Even the Federal Capital, Abuja, is no longer immune, as Fulani kidnappers inhabiting the forests surrounding Abuja attack neighbourhoods, break into homes and kidnap entire families, including non-Fulani Muslims.⁴

According to the Civil Society Joint Action Group, Community of Practice Against Mass Atrocities and Nigeria Mourns, at least 2,423 people were killed in mass atrocity-related incidents and at least 1,872 persons were abducted in the eight months since President Tinubu took his oath of office: 'We are particularly concerned about the upsurge in abductions, noting that at least 230 incidents, in most of which multiple victims were involved, occurred within the first 2 weeks of January 2024 alone.'⁵

In a worrying admission, Nigeria's Minister of Environment, Balarabe Abbas, lamented that it was 'quite unfortunate that most of our forests have been taken over by bandits, kidnappers and other terrorists that have been unleashing mayhem on innocent Nigerians.'⁶

Prelude to Christmas Eve violence

So far CSW Nigeria (CSWN) has confirmed the deaths of 186 people in 25 communities in Barkin Ladi, Bokkos and Mangu LGAs, with around 10,000 others displaced with an additional 50,000 fleeing from areas close to the violence for fear of being attacked.

Testimonies from survivors are harrowing. Several people were burnt to death in their homes. In one case, the body of a victim, a final year student in the Plateau State University, Bokkos, was buried without his head, which the attackers carried away with them. In an act of singular cruelty, they returned the head in early January, throwing it behind of his family's house after it had been mauled by animals. The legs of this same victim had also been cut off during the attack, while the face of another was hacked with such ferocity that he was no longer recognisable.

Among those killed in the Dares community in Bokkos LGA were nine members of the Nasara Baptist Church, including the church leader, Pastor Solomon Gushe, and his wife. In the NTA community in Majahota, also in Bokkos LGA, victims included Rev. Jonathan Daluk, the District Superintendent of the Assemblies of God (AOG) Church in the area, along with his mother and younger brother.

The violence over the festive season was part of a series of attacks that have blighted the area since April 2023, after Nigeria's electoral period concluded. The violence began with an attack on Kuwa Murish in Mangu LGA in which eight people were killed, which was followed by a series of attacks on other areas in Barkin Ladi, Mangu and Riyom LGAs. By mid-November 2023, according to CSWN's findings, over 250 people had been killed, 25 churches burnt, and properties worth billions of Naira looted or destroyed in attacks on 54 villages.

During a visit to the area in November 2023, CSW UK and CSWN interviewed victims of earlier violence. The interviews highlighted the following concerns, which came into focus once more during the attacks in December 2023 and subsequently.

a) 'Silent Killings' in between largescale violence

The main concern articulated by survivors was about what they termed 'slow and silent killings', i.e. regular killings of individuals or groups in secret and in smaller numbers, as opposed to the mass attacks they had experienced. Not only were the slow but steady murders worrying in and of

1 <https://www.csw.org.uk/2010/03/08/press/964/article.htm>

2 *ibid.*

3 <https://pmnewsnigeria.com/2024/01/29/gunmen-shoot-two-ekiti-traditional-rulers-dead-one-escapes/>

4 <https://x.com/KcUzoka/status/1746923432707576074?s=20>; <https://x.com/AkpraiseMedia/status/1746468968494141886?s=20>

5 <https://independent.ng/fulfil-constitutional-mandate-of-safeguarding-nigerians-csos-charge-tinubu/>

6 <https://gazettengr.com/most-forests-in-nigeria-taken-over-by-bandits-kidnappers-fg/>

themselves, they also appeared to be intermediate actions, filling the gap between episodes of larger-scale violence, such as the Christmas Eve attacks.

A survivor from the Dungmunan community in Kombun LGA informed CSW and CSWN: 'On 14 April a man was killed by a Fulani man on his farm. This latest in ongoing murders created tension in the city which escalated to crisis level.' Subsequent 'mutual fighting' caused eight deaths initially. However, by the end of that day 22 had been killed in Kubat village and 33 in Funzai. By the morning of 15 April, close to 54 villages in the LGA had come under attack. 'There were over 10,000 attackers. Everyone tried to escape.'

Almost 17 people were killed in Dungmunan and surrounding areas. 'Some can't be buried because it is so insecure, so they have decayed in the bush. Up until now there are silent killings. Last week four people were killed when they went to put a roof on a house for soldiers.'

A survivor of a 9 June 2023 attack on the Vodni community in Pushit LGA described these silent killings as constituting 'a major problem now,' adding that a man was missing following an ambush launched on the day of the meeting with CSW and CSWN.

In the lead up to the violence in December 2023, a survivor from the NTA community described the extortion his community experienced after selling its harvest. Fulani men descended on the community saying: 'Bring money, bring money, bring money. We will not kill you today. We've come for money.'⁷

b) Looting and destruction of every means of livelihood

Another pattern in militia attacks which was repeated during the December violence and continues in January 2024 is the burning down of homes, churches and vicarages. In addition, the militia specifically targets food barns in order to ensure that survivors attempting to return to their home area will not only be homeless, but will struggle to feed or otherwise sustain themselves and their families.

A survivor of an attack on Vodni in Pushit LGA on 9 June 2023 informed CSW and CSWN that the militia men destroyed crops that had recently been planted, while every house in the Gwet community, also in Pushit LGA, was destroyed, along with the local church.

Another interviewee, who had survived an attack on the Kantoma community in Mangu LGA on 16 May 2023 which continued for over a week, said that in addition to the destruction of homes and foodstuffs, militia men also carried away the cables for the village's three transformers and overhead solar tank, and destroyed four water irrigation machines which he and his brothers used for farming.

A survivor who lost her husband, son, father-in-law and two brothers-in-law during a 16 May attack on Kyampus in Mangu LGA lamented about how the militia attack had 'affected the

entire community. They burnt everywhere and everything, including homes and foodstuffs, and looted sheep, goats and chickens.'

c) Advance warnings

Survivors often speak of anonymous letters or telephone calls in which assailants announce their intentions to attack, and of warning signs that an attack may be imminent. These announcements are made openly, indicating that the militia's confidence in being able to make good on their threats with minimal, if any, repercussions, a confidence engendered by significant and long-standing impunity.

For example, in the heightened atmosphere in the aftermath of the Christmas Eve attacks, the Pushit community in Mangu LGA received a letter on 28 December 2024 stating there would be an attack on their village the next day that would cause them to be 'running in the street with chicken and Christmas rice' in their hands.

A woman who left her village in Bokkos LGA a day before it was attacked on 24 December and lost her father, two brothers, niece, nephew and family home stated that the militia had been threatening to attack them on several occasions: 'These Fulani people have been bringing their cattle to our farmland to destroy our crops, and when we complain, they will threaten to attack and kill us. We have been reporting the threats to our traditional ruler, but he refused to do anything about it because of the gifts he gets from them. They always gift him cows and other things; he never lacks meat in his house. That is why they did not touch his house during the attack.'⁸

Perhaps one of the most significant, and certainly the most long-standing warning sign of impending attacks, is when Fulani communities withdraw their families and cattle to safer areas.

For example, a mother of four informed CSWN and CSW that she had left her home in Vodni along with her children prior to the attack on community after noticing local Fulanis fleeing leaving their villages with their wives, children and cattle, and because of this she was not there when the area was attacked on 9 June 2023 at around 1.30 pm, and her husband was killed.

The female interviewee who lost her husband, son, father-in-law and two brothers in law in an attack on the Kyampus community on 16 May 2023 reported seeing people from the Dungunan community fleeing towards her community as she was attending the 6.30pm women's fellowship meeting. The meeting dispersed immediately and upon returning home she found her husband, son and in-laws discussing the rising tensions. They informed her it would be best for women and children to leave the village; however, she did not leave right away.

Soon afterwards, the local Fulani community was seen evacuating their women, children and cattle, indicating an

⁷ https://x.com/pwajok_jane/status/1742797605799674218?s=20

⁸ <https://persecondnews.com/2024/01/09/plateau-killings-real-reason-suspected-fulani-militia-attacked-bokkos-a-persecondnews-exclusive/>

attack was imminent. She attempted to leave but discovered there was no longer a safe way out: ‘they started firing guns and bullets towards us and I managed to escape, firstly to Bwai, and then to Mangu Town. That day they killed eight people.’

A survivor from Kantoma village in Mangu LGA said that prior to the attack on the Dungmunan, Jwak and Kyampos communities, Fulanis had called, saying ‘nothing will happen to you.’ However, once it began, the attack on the area continued for a week, resulting in 24 casualties who ‘did not have a fitting burial’, as it was too dangerous to hold a funeral for them. ‘We paid for the police to fuel their vehicles and escort us there to bury them hurriedly in the rain.’

d) Protection gap and possible complicity

Attacks continue even though soldiers have been deployed to the LGAs currently under attack. Often, and despite multiple calls from besieged communities, the military arrive after the killing spree has finished, blaming their delay on the difficult terrain and the distance between communities which are often attacked simultaneously.

Some in the military also attribute the inability to protect villagers and end well-armed insurgencies to a lack of adequate equipment and limited artillery. For example, a survivor of the Christmas Day attacks described how he had run to a nearby army checkpoint to inform the soldiers his community was under attack and urge their intervention. However, they informed him they did not have the ammunition to engage the attackers.

During the attack on Vodni, the military said they were on their way, but did not assist, reportedly because they feared being ambushed themselves. Moreover, according to the Deputy National Publicity Secretary of the Middle Belt Forum, prior to the Christmas Eve attacks security agencies had received around 37 distress calls ahead of the attacks ‘yet nothing was done’ to prevent them.⁹

Unfortunately, there are also credible accusations of complicity by elements within the military.

For example, the CSW team was informed that on 15 May 2023 the Kogul community saw Fulanis arriving with a large herd of cattle at about 6am. When they tried to stop them and ask what they were doing, military men from a nearby check point approached in a Hilux van and told the community to allow them to pass. They subsequently escorted the Fulanis to Changal village and returned to their checkpoint.

However, 10 minutes later gunshots rang out as assailants began burning houses and attacking villagers. The attack reportedly lasted for five to six hours, with no military intervention, and when it was over, Ajing, Changal, Daika, Dundai, Fishfar, Jwakecham, Kambili, Kwahas, Lakwapal,

Larkas and Washna villages were burnt, and 48 people were dead.

Then on 7 July Kagul and Nyes villages were attacked at around 2am and 11 people were killed. As the militia was returning, local youth mobilised and surrounded them. In a worrying development, the CSW team was informed that the assailants informed the military of their predicament, who arrived in armoured cars and began shooting teargas at the youth, allowing the killers to escape.

In January 2024, attacks resumed in Mangu LGA following the confirmation by the Supreme Court of the victory of the opposition party candidate in the gubernatorial elections – Mangu is his home area. The attacks began shortly after the governor had held an Interdenominational Thanksgiving Service following the Supreme Court judgement.

According to Sunday Dankaka, National President of the Mwaghavul Youth Movement (MYM), over 91 persons were killed and 158 injured in the renewed violence in Mangu LGA. In addition, nine mosques and 15 churches were affected in the violence which began on 22 January.¹⁰

The looting and burning of identified Christian homes and churches, the genesis of the crisis,¹¹ continued throughout the week, with over 30 people killed during a 24-hour curfew declared by the governor. Reports emerged once more of army complicity, as members of local Christian communities¹² and the chair of the Mangu Chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria¹³ accused the army of shooting at youth who were protecting their areas from attackers, killing three of them, while allowing the assailants to operate unhindered, including during curfew hours.

In another example of possible complicity, a Fulani soldier named Abdulhamid Sule Boki, ‘who was born and brought up in Mangu’, stands accused of shooting an assistant youth chairman in the Murish community with an anti-aircraft gun, which mutilated his arm. According to a credible citizen journalist’s X handle, he and other soldiers of Fulani ethnicity reportedly ‘killed innocent Christians running for their lives around Angwan Mission. They went house to house raining anti-aircraft bullets in Angwan Sarki close to Mangu mini stadium.’

e) Lack of accountability, justice and closure

Few, if any, perpetrators of militia violence are caught, let alone face trial, yet several survivors who spoke to the CSW team in November insisted that the whereabouts of the militia are known to the authorities, and cited the existence of a camp housing over 5,000 of them in Bakin Ladi: ‘the government knows but has done nothing about it yet.’

A similar assertion was made by Hon Peter Ibrahim Gyendeng of the Plateau State House of Representatives in an interview

9 <https://punchng.com/plateau-massacre-invaders-write-community-threaten-fresh-attacks-un-demands-probe/>

10 <https://leadership.ng/91-persons-killed-158-injured-114-houses-raised-in-mangu/>

11 <https://x.com/jerrydoubles/status/1752606164536164470?s=20>

12 <https://twitter.com/i/status/1750320748906889558>

13 <https://twitter.com/i/status/1750216886661312911>

with Arise TV: ‘These people are coming from three villages; they meet, then attack and go back.’ He also confirmed that the militia are armed with ‘more sophisticated weapons than the security that are there to protect the people.’¹⁴

Furthermore, The Middle Belt Forum (MBF) issued a statement identifying the militia’s hideout from which they ‘launch their attacks on the States of Plateau, Benue, Nasarawa, Taraba and Southern Kaduna’ as the Mahanga Forest on the border between Bokokos and Nasarawa State, asserting the authorities have known this ‘for decades, yet they have deliberately fortified this evil theatre from any destruction thus providing a safe haven for these terrorists to smuggle arms, train their mercenaries and unleash unimaginable terror on innocent citizens without any provocation whatsoever.’¹⁵

Worryingly, when arrests are made, it is invariably local youth who are taken into custody, mistreated, and on occasion, even accused of being responsible for attacks on their own communities, as occurred following the Christmas Eve violence.

During the CSW November 2023 fact-finding visit, a survivor of the 7 July 2023 attack on Kogul Village told the team that two months earlier a Fulani man had contacted the village and informed them he would be coming to hold discussions with the District Head, but did not turn up. ‘Instead, the military came and picked some youths, including my younger brother. They are still being held in an unknown place. Two weeks ago, they picked two more youths whose whereabouts are also now unknown. We fear both the Fulani and the military.’

More recently, after local youth were arrested once again following the discovery of the bodies of two Fulani men, women in Bokokos LGA protested outside the headquarters of the Special Task Force (STF, also known as Operation Safe Haven), and at the Divisional Police Office (DPO). They later set fire to the palace of Bokokos District Head Michael Monday Adanchin, who they felt was ‘selling out community members to the police for arrest.’ A local source informed Nigerian media that ‘the women got angry because these people came to murder our people; you didn’t do anything about it, and you are still arresting us. Look at them at the top of the rock; you cannot go and meet them and chase them out of the area?’¹⁶

Meanwhile, the violence continues. On 29 January, the leader of Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) No. 1 Maiduna Daffo, Bokokos LGA, was killed and his official residence was burnt, and on 30 January the Garau community in Mbar, Bokokos LGA, came under attack.

f) Farmer-herder ‘clashes’

A religious dimension to the ongoing violence in Plateau

and other central Nigerian states such as Benue and Kaduna has been apparent for over a decade. The perpetrators have repeatedly used religion as a rallying point for recruitment or claimed it as their *raison d’être*, while the victims are almost invariably non-Muslim farming communities in a region where ethnicity generally correlates with religion, and therefore ethnic minorities are invariably also religious ones.

In addition, there is increasing evidence of links between the Fulani militia and other notorious and overtly Islamist terrorist groups such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province and the al Qaeda affiliate Ansaru, who are responsible for similarly egregious violence in the northeast of the country.¹⁷

The narrative that this crisis is a communal conflict between farmers and herders is now redundant. While there has been a long history of such disputes across the Sahel, and while it is important to note that not all Fulani communities or herders are involved in this violence, the current attacks are occurring with such frequency, organisation and asymmetry that to characterise them as ‘clashes’ over resources no longer suffices.

Moreover, claims circulating over social media as part of what appears to be an organised disinformation campaign, which describe the Christmas Eve violence as being in reprisal for cattle theft and rebrand videos of attacks on Christian communities as attacks by Christians on Muslim communities, appear to be designed to deflect attention from the actual perpetrators. In reality, this violence constitutes ethno-religious cleansing, as land is occupied by Fulani groups following the forced displacement of indigenous communities from their ancestral lands.

A survivor of the Christmas Eve killings insisted that ‘the first thing is that this people should be given a name; they are to be called terrorists and this has to be called ethnic cleansing. Because part of the reason why there is no intervention and the international community is turning a blind eye to this, is because the government is painting the picture as if it were a farmer-herders clash. How can one ethnic group be having a farmer-herders clash in Southern Kaduna, having a farmer-herders clash in all eight local government [areas] in Plateau State, having farmer-herders clash in Benue. Then the problem is the government clearly. So, first of all they have to be called terrorist, they have to be given the name.’¹⁸

To an extent, Nigerian authorities appeared to draw a similar conclusion in January 2022, when a government gazette designated all armed non-state actors operating in this manner as terrorists. Yet even this has not prompted effective action to stem the violence.

Predictably, the violence has exacerbated communal tension and mutual distrust which poses significant challenges to

14 https://x.com/Spotlight_Abby/status/1739564371989164434?s=20

15 <https://www.arise.tv/middle-belt-forum-accuses-nigerian-government-of-complicity-in-incessant-terrorist-attacks-demands-state-police/>

16 <https://fij.ng/article/women-set-fire-to-community-heads-home-office-over-possible-connections-to-plateau-attackers/>

17 <https://www.csw.org.uk/2023/07/18/report/6106/article.htm>

18 <https://twitter.com/i/status/1750216886661312911>

peaceful coexistence, and could have knock-on effects for stability not only in Nigeria, but also throughout West Africa and indeed the entire continent. A terminally failed Nigeria would pose a significant threat to regional and international peace and security, given the number of terrorist enterprises operating in the country. It is therefore vital that members of the international community substantially increase their efforts to assist Nigeria in stemming this violence, and to hold the Nigerian authorities accountable for any failure to protect their citizens.

In conclusion, as Matthew Hassan Kukah, the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Sokoto and founder of the Kukah Centre recently wrote, ordinary Nigerians are ‘tired of the confusing, inexcusable, monosyllabic excuses saying: this is an asymmetrical war, we are on top of the situation, you cannot kill an idea, it is not about religion or ethnicity, we will bring them to justice. We, citizens of Nigeria, feel collectively humiliated and betrayed by those who are collaborating with these murderers and a government that seems helpless. Can we continue to believe that there is no long-term plan to take over the reins of power of the Nigerian state? These people want power. They want it on their own terms. They want their own kind of Nigeria, according to their ideology. These killings are just a preface. These killings are no longer acts by herders and farmers over grazing fields. No, there is more and we as a nation will do well to face this threat before it is sunset.’¹⁹

19 <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/655131-nigeria-blood-and-crucifixion-on-the-plateau-by-matthew-hassan-kukah.html>

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T +32 473 53 29 50
T @CSWAdvocacy
F /CSWUK
csw.org.uk

PO BOX 90 Brussels Livingstone
1000 Brussels,
Belgium

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