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Nigeria: Protect Survivors, Fully Investigate Massacre Reports

At Least 150 Killed by Mobs in Kuru Karama

January 23, 2010

(Dakar) - Nigeria's vice president should order an immediate criminal investigation into credible reports of a massacre of at least 150 Muslim residents of a town in central Nigeria, Human Rights Watch said today.

The killings, allegedly by groups of men armed with knives, machetes, and guns, were in the town of Kuru Karama, 30 kilometers south of the city of Jos in Plateau State in central Nigeria.

"Something extremely serious has happened in the town," said Corinne Dufka, senior West Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The authorities need to act now both to bring those behind these heinous crimes to justice and to protect both the survivors and those at risk of renewed violence."

Witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that groups of armed men attacked the largely Muslim population of Kuru Karama around 10 a.m. on January 19, 2010. After surrounding the town, they hunted down and attacked Muslim residents, some of whom had sought refuge in homes and a local mosque, killing many as they tried to flee and burning many others alive. The witnesses said they believed members of the armed groups to be Christians.

Community leaders from Jos and journalists who visited the town under military escort later in the week told Human Rights Watch that they saw bodies, including several charred corpses of young children and babies, strewn around town, including dozens stuffed down wells or in sewage pits. According to a Muslim official who visited the town to arrange for burial of the bodies, 121 have been recovered so far, including the bodies of 22 young children. The official told Human Rights Watch that corpses are still lodged in 16 wells. Journalists and community leaders who visited the town said that nearly all of the homes and the three main mosques were burned and destroyed.

One of the town's Muslim imams wounded in the attack told Human Rights Watch that a Christian pastor tried to stop the attack but was beaten by the armed mob. There are conflicting reports of the police response. One witness reported that at least one police officer participated in the attack, while another said the police abandoned their post shortly before the violence began. Witnesses said the killings took place throughout the day, without police intervention to stop the violence, despite repeated calls to the police.



A Nigerian Red Cross official tends to a wounded man at an emergency center in Jos on January 21, 2010.

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Corinne Dufka, senior West Africa researcher

The Plateau State police commissioner, Greg Anyating, told Human Rights Watch that the reported death tolls in Plateau State were false, and the police would issue "correct figures" on the number of dead in a few days, following an inquiry.

In a televised address to the nation on January 21, Vice President Goodluck Jonathan, the acting president, pledged that the perpetrators of the violence in Plateau State and their sponsors would not evade justice. "The federal government is determined to secure convictions of the perpetrators of this crime, no matter how highly placed," he said.

"Vice President Jonathan's statement that the perpetrators will be prosecuted is a start," Dufka said. "But now he needs to make sure the police conduct an immediate and impartial investigation."

Nigeria is deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines. More than 13,500 people have died in religious or ethnic clashes since the end of military rule in 1999. In Plateau State, an unprecedented outbreak of violence in Jos claimed as many as 1,000 lives in September 2001; more than 700 people died in May 2004 in inter-communal clashes in the town of Yelwa in the southern part of the state; and at least 700 people were killed in the violence in Jos on November 28 and 29, 2008. Human Rights Watch documented 133 cases of unlawful killings by members of the security forces in responding to the 2008 violence.

The latest outbreak started in Jos on January 17 and quickly spread to neighboring communities, including Kuru Karama. There are conflicting reports of what triggered the Jos violence. Civil society leaders reported that it began with an argument over the rebuilding of a Muslim home destroyed in the November 2008 violence in a predominately Christian neighborhood. Police Commissioner Greg Anyating said the trigger was an attack by Muslim youth on Christian worshippers in the Nassarawa Gwom district of Jos, which Muslim leaders deny. There are also several credible reports that the military and police used excessive force against both Christians and Muslims in responding to the violence.

Muslim leaders in Plateau State reported today that at least 364 Muslims have been killed in Jos and surrounding communities, including 187 of the dead that have been taken to the Jos central mosque for burial. A Christian leader told Human Rights Watch today that the Christian Association of Nigeria is still compiling figures on the number of Christians killed.

In December 2008, President Umaru Yar'Adua set up a panel to investigate the 2008 Jos violence, but the panel only began hearings in December 2009. The Plateau State governor, Jonah Jang, also formed a commission of inquiry, which held hearings but did not investigate alleged abuses by security forces. The commission's report, submitted to the state governor in October 2009, has not been made public.

Human Rights Watch said the government should also take concrete steps to end the discriminatory policies that treat certain groups as second-class citizens and lie at the root of much of the inter-communal violence in Nigeria. Government policies that discriminate against "non-indigenes" - people who cannot trace their ancestry to those said to be the original inhabitants of an area - underlie many of these conflicts. Non-indigenes are openly denied the right to compete for government jobs and academic scholarships. In Jos and in Kuru Karama, members of the largely Muslim Hausa ethnic group are classified as non-indigenes though many have lived there for several generations.

Human Rights Watch also called on the federal government to pass legislation prohibiting government discrimination against non-indigenes in all matters that are not purely cultural or related to traditional leadership institutions.

Selected Witness Accounts

A 32-year-old resident of Kuru Karama, described to Human Rights Watch what happened:

"Kuru is an old mining town. There are over 3,000 people who live in the community. When we heard that there was crisis in Jos [on Sunday], we went to the [local] Berom chief on Sunday and Monday, he said we should go back home, and go in peace. We went home and relaxed. On Tuesday [January 19] we sat down in the police station and [all] agreed that nothing would happen in the community. The three Muslim leaders were there; the three pastors were there; the chiefs of the Berom and Hausa were there. We then went home. After 15-20 minutes we saw people dropping [entering the town] from the mountains. They were Berom - the tribe of the governor. They were armed with cutlasses, guns, sticks, and bags of stones. It was not the Christians from our community but those from outside who came. Before they reached the area, we called the pastors who said it was none of their business.

I saw one policeman kill more than three people. This is not what I heard from people; I saw it with my own eyes. We were running away, and we met the policeman. He shot a small boy who fell on the ground, and we hid. We had only stones in our hands. He also killed a woman with a baby.

The children were running helter-skelter. The men were trying to protect the women. People who ran to the bush were killed. Some were burned in the mosque, and some went to the houses and were burned. We think 250-300 have been killed, including babies and children. My brother lost four of his children. I personally saw more than 20-30 bodies of children. Some were sliced into two from the head downward; others were burned; others were amputated. I saw a mother lying down and the baby lying next to her.

I am married with two children and one wife. I was waiting for her [my wife], I could not see her. I left Kuru after 12 midnight [early Wednesday morning]. I ran to neighboring villages. The next evening I saw her. She was wounded badly. The 11-month-old girl, they [the mobs] used an axe and cut her. They are both at the hospital.

I came back on Wednesday evening escorted by the military. I saw dead bodies everywhere. The corpses were there, but now you can just see the blood on the ground. None of the houses are standing. All the mosques were liquidated."

A community leader who was in Kuru Karama the day of the massacre described to Human Rights Watch what he saw:

"Around 10 a.m. we started seeing people coming around and surrounding us. They said they will take our land, saying we are the non-indigenes. They started throwing stones, shooting bows and arrows, shooting guns; we tried to defend ourselves, but we had nothing.

After they started beating us and we ran back to the village, we started to gather our wives and children and put them in the central mosque because anyone who knows religion knows the mosque and church are safe places. We left a few people in the mosque and then went back to defend ourselves, but we couldn't make it because we didn't have anything to protect ourselves with, and we couldn't run because they had

surrounded us. So we had to just try to defend ourselves before they killed us. So along the way they were killing us. They were shooting us, hitting us with knives, burning us. They followed us; we went to another place, and they killed us. We were going round, and round, and round.

I saw what happened in the central mosque. They pursued us. They burned the mosque. They killed people in our presence. They burned the mosque with the women and children in it. There were over 100 bodies in the mosque - women and children. We couldn't run away. All of us were wounded. They burned the whole village. There are 200-500 Muslim houses and they burned them all. The central mosque is a big mosque and was destroyed. They have killed almost 500 people. Some people ran to the bush and were killed. The dead bodies are in the wells, some in the soakaways. The fighting went on from 10 a.m. until 10 p.m. They [the mobs] ran away and left at night.

I have three wives and four children. I saw the dead body of one wife; they had burned half of her. The remaining wives and my four children, I have not seen them. There are those who are burned to ashes, and you don't know who is who."

<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/01/22/nigeria-protect-survivors-fully-investigate-massacre-reports>

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