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Nigeria: Halt Violence in Local Elections

5/5-04

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(New York, March 25, 2004) -- Nigerian officials should take decisive steps to prevent further violence related to local government elections scheduled to take place across Nigeria on Saturday, Human Rights Watch said today.

In the weeks leading up to the local elections, there have been several apparently politically motivated assassinations. In the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), a prominent official from Delta State was shot dead in February, while a state electoral commissioner and a candidate for local government chairmanship in Kogi State were both killed in March. A vehicle carrying the Benue State governor, also from the PDP, was also attacked in March. The governor escaped unhurt, but a friend traveling with him and a police officer were killed. There has been speculation that some of these incidents may have been caused by infighting within the PDP.

In Delta State, in the south, and Plateau State, in central Nigeria, the prospect of local elections has also reignited ongoing inter-ethnic conflict, leading to further killings as communities have clashed in battles over political control.

During federal and state elections in 2003, more than 100 people were killed and many more were injured. The failure of the Nigerian authorities to prosecute those responsible has created a climate of impunity and encouraged further acts of violence in the run-up to this year's local government elections.

"Political candidates and their supporters are not hesitating to use violence to secure votes, because last year's elections taught them that they could get away with it," said Peter Takirambudde, executive director of Human Rights Watch's Africa Division.

Human Rights Watch called on Nigeria's foreign partners, in particular the United Kingdom and the United States, to urge the Nigeria government to take greater measures to limit electoral violence, including enforcing accountability for these crimes. In 2003 the international community was reluctant to criticize the general elections despite extensive violence and intimidation.

"We must not see a repeat of 2003, when Nigeria's allies turned a blind eye to politically motivated violence and gave the elections a clean bill of health," said Takirambudde. "Extensive and egregious violations, many of them perpetrated by the ruling party, called into question the integrity of the vote in those elections."

Human Rights Watch urged the Nigerian government to end impunity for political violence and to put in place concrete measures to prevent a repeat of such incidents well in advance of the next general elections, which are scheduled to take place in 2007.

Human Rights Watch collected detailed testimony of incidents of violence and intimidation during the election period from April to May 2003. Many of these abuses in 2003 were carried out by PDP supporters, but supporters of the larger opposition parties were also responsible for killings and injuries. So far, very few of the perpetrators have faced justice. There were also cases where members of the security forces stood by during violent incidents, or participated in abuses themselves.

Human Rights Watch found that the worst situation was in southern and southeastern Nigeria, where in many locations voting did not take place due to widespread violence and threats aimed at rigging the results. Some of the worst-affected states were Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers—all in the oil-producing Niger delta—and Ebonyi and Imo in the southeast.

The largest number of deaths occurred during clashes between political thugs, many of whom had been well-armed by their political sponsors. In other cases, party supporters targeted individual political opponents and also other voters who tried to prevent rigging. Although several high-profile politicians were killed, most of the victims were low-level party supporters. The 2003 elections also demonstrated that the fiercest battles for political control were played out at the local level.

Related Material

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Report, January 1, 2004

From: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/03/24/nigeri8214.htm>

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