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Nigeria: Use Restraint in Curbing Jos Violence

(Dakar) - Nigeria should ensure that its security forces use restraint and comply with international standards on the use of force in responding to the latest deadly outbreak of inter-communal violence in the city of Jos, Human Rights Watch said today. The government should also investigate and prosecute those responsible for the killing of at least 200 people during the violence, the latest of several deadly outbreaks in Nigeria, and address the underlying causes.

This latest violence comes just over a year after Christian and Muslim clashes and the excessive use of force by the security forces responding to the conflict left more than 700 dead in Jos, the capital of Plateau State in central Nigeria.

"This is not the first outbreak of deadly violence in Jos, but the government has shockingly failed to hold anyone accountable," said Corinne Dufka, senior West Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Enough is enough. Nigeria's leaders need to tackle the vicious cycle of violence bred by this impunity."

Clashes between Christian and Muslim mobs reignited in Jos on Sunday morning, January 17, 2010. There are conflicting reports of what triggered the violence. Civil society leaders report that it began with an argument over the rebuilding of a Muslim home destroyed in the November 2008 violence in a predominately Christian neighborhood. The Plateau State police commissioner, Greg Anyating, said the trigger was an attack by Muslim youth on Christian worshippers in the Nassarawa Gwom district of Jos, an allegation that Muslim leaders deny.

According to credible reports from civil society leaders, and national and international media, the violence was carried out by sectarian mobs armed with guns, bows and arrows, and machetes. Roving gangs are reported to have burned and looted houses, cars, and shops, as well as several churches and mosques. There are also several credible reports that the military and police used excessive force in responding to the violence.

Muslim leaders reported that 80 of the dead were taken to the central mosque in Jos on Tuesday for burial, in addition to 71 buried during the first two days of clashes. One Christian official reported that by Monday, 50 Christians had died in the violence and another 15 were killed on Tuesday. The three days of clashes have forced at least 5,000 people from their homes. On Monday the state government deployed additional military

and anti-riot police units to the streets of Jos and on Tuesday morning imposed a 24-hour curfew in the city. Witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that gunshots could still be heard around the city in the late afternoon, and smoke was seen billowing from the worst-affected neighborhoods.

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. Police officers and soldiers gunned down residents in their homes, chased down and killed unarmed men trying to flee to safety, and lined up victims on the ground and summarily executed them. The government has failed to hold anyone accountable for these crimes.

President Umaru Yar'Adua set up a panel to investigate, 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 called on the Nigerian security forces to abide by the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials in carrying out their duties. State security forces are required to apply nonviolent means as far as possible before resorting to the use of force, and where lawful use of force is unavoidable, restraint is to be used at all times to minimize damage and injury and to respect and preserve human life. Any order authorizing indiscriminate use of violence by security forces, such as "shoot-on-sight" orders, would violate these principles.

The government should also take concrete steps to end the discriminatory policies that treat certain groups as second-class citizens and that 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, members of the largely Muslim Hausa ethnic group are classified as non-indigenes though many have resided there for several generations.

Human Rights Watch has 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.

"Nigeria needs to act now to end discriminatory policies and hold accountable those who commit these terrible acts of violence," Dufka said.

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