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Nigeria: Post-Election Violence Killed 800

(Dakar) - Deadly election-related and communal violence in northern Nigeria following the April 2011 presidential voting left more than 800 people dead, Human Rights Watch said today. The victims were killed in three days of rioting in 12 northern states. Nigeria's state and federal authorities should promptly investigate and prosecute those who orchestrated and carried out these crimes and address the root causes of recurring inter-communal violence.

The violence began with widespread protests by supporters of the main opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, a northern Muslim from the Congress for Progressive Change, following the re-election of incumbent Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the Niger Delta in the south, who was the candidate for the ruling People's Democratic Party. The protests degenerated into violent riots or sectarian killings in the northern states of Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara. Relief officials estimate that more than 65,000 people have been displaced.

"The April elections were heralded as among the fairest in Nigeria's history, but they also were among the bloodiest," said Corinne Dufka, senior West Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The newly elected authorities should quickly build on the democratic gains from the elections by bringing to justice those who orchestrated these horrific crimes and addressing the root causes of the violence."

The presidential election divided the country along ethnic and religious lines. As election results trickled in on April 17, and it became clear that Buhari had lost, his supporters took to the streets of northern towns and cities to protest what they alleged to be the rigging of the results.

The protesters started burning tires, and the protests soon turned into riots. The rioting quickly degenerated into sectarian and ethnic bloodletting across the northern states. Muslim rioters targeted and killed Christians and members of ethnic groups from southern Nigeria, who were perceived to have supported the ruling party, burning their churches, shops, and homes. The rioters also attacked police stations and ruling party and electoral commission offices. In predominately Christian communities in Kaduna

State, mobs of Christians retaliated by killing Muslims and burning their mosques and properties.

According to the Christian Association of Nigeria, the umbrella organization representing the majority of Christian churches in Nigeria, at least 170 Christians were killed in the post-election riots, hundreds more were injured, and thousands displaced. The organization also reported that more than 350 churches were burned or destroyed by the Muslim rioters across 10 northern states.

In the predominately Christian towns and villages of southern Kaduna State, including Zonkwa, Matsirga, and Kafanchan, sectarian clashes left more than 500 dead, according to Muslim and Christian leaders interviewed by Human Rights Watch. The vast majority of the victims in these areas were Muslim.

Human Rights Watch estimates that in northern Kaduna State, at least 180 people, and possibly more, were killed in the cities of Kaduna and Zaria and their surrounding suburbs. According to media reports and journalists interviewed by Human Rights Watch, dozens of people were also killed during riots in the other northern states.

A lecturer at a college on the outskirts of Zaria described an attack on the college: "When you see the mob, they were not in their senses," he said. "The students ran away but the mob pursued them into the staff quarters and they had nowhere to go. The mob beat them to death and hit them with machetes. Four Christian students and a Christian lecturer were killed."

Following the violence, a Human Rights Watch researcher drove through smoldering towns in the southern part of Katsina State, interviewed witnesses in the cities of Kaduna and Zaria in northern Kaduna State, and visited burned out villages in southern Kaduna State, including Zonkwa, Matsirga, and Kafanchan, that resembled war zones with entire neighborhoods razed to the ground.

Human Rights Watch conducted more than 55 interviews with witnesses and victims of the violence, Christian and Muslim clergy, traditional leaders, police officials, civil society leaders, and journalists. Researchers also conducted telephone interviews with witnesses of the violence in Bauchi, Gombe, Kano, and Zamfara states.

In many of the northern towns and cities, Christians found refuge in police stations and military barracks. In southern Kaduna State, Muslim women and children flocked to police stations for safety. The police successfully protected people in many cases, but they were largely ineffective at controlling the rioting and violence in other places, Human Rights Watch found. In several cases, witnesses told Human Rights Watch that it was often not until soldiers were deployed to affected areas that the violence was halted.

Both the police and the military were implicated in the excessive use of force and other serious abuses while responding to the rioting and sectarian violence. Human Rights Watch documented eight cases of alleged unlawful killing of unarmed residents by the police and soldiers in the cities of Zaria and Kaduna, and received credible reports of more than a dozen other incidents.

Human Rights Watch also received credible reports that the police and soldiers in Kaduna, Gombe, and Bauchi states systematically beat people rounded up during or after the riots. Many of the detainees charged at the Chief Magistrate's Court in Kaduna city had fresh scars on their backs, journalists who attended the hearing told Human Rights Watch. In the town of Azare, in northern Bauchi State, witnesses told Human Rights Watch that detainees were severely beaten by soldiers and police. One of the detainees' hands was reportedly broken, while another detainee was hospitalized as a result of the beatings.

"The Nigerian authorities should promptly investigate these credible reports of unlawful

killings and other abuses by members of the security forces," Dufka said. "The use of violence by rioters, mobs, and state actors alike needs to be stopped."

On May 11, President Jonathan appointed a new 22-member panel to investigate the causes and extent of the election violence.

The police spokesperson in Kaduna State told Human Rights Watch that more than 500 people have been arrested and charged following the recent post-election violence. But police and state prosecutors in the past have rarely followed through with criminal investigations and effective prosecutions.

In the town of Kafanchan, one of the Christian leaders lamented to Human Rights Watch that past commissions of inquiry have failed to bring the culprits to book.

"There have been commissions of inquiries set up in the past, but I don't know what they did; that is why we are really skeptical," he said. "I want to believe that if they had done justice, maybe a repeat of this wouldn't have come. This time justice should be done."

Improved Elections but a New Cycle of Violence

Improved Elections

Nigeria held three rounds of elections - legislative on April 9, presidential on April 16, and gubernatorial on April 26. Human Rights Watch researchers monitored the human rights dimension of the elections, including freedom of assembly, expression, and association, during each round - Bauchi and Benue states during the legislative elections, Katsina and Oyo states for the presidential round, and Akwa Ibom and Kaduna states for the gubernatorial voting.

The Independent National Electoral Commission, under its new chairman, Attahiru Jega, significantly improved the conduct of the elections, creating a new voters' register, improving transparency in reporting results, and publicly pledging to hold accountable those who broke the rules. Elections were held in most areas of the country in a largely peaceful atmosphere, with fewer reported incidents of violence or blatant police abuses than in previous years.

Despite the improvements, though, there were still incidents of violence, hijacking of ballot boxes by party thugs, and reports of police misconduct, particularly in southeast Nigeria and the volatile Niger Delta region.

Violence linked to the party primaries and campaigns, and on the days of the elections, has left at least 165 people dead since November 2010. One of the leading gubernatorial candidates in Borno State was assassinated in January 2011, bombings in four states - Bayelsa, Borno, Kaduna, and Niger - left dozens dead, and clashes between opposing party supporters or attacks by party thugs during the campaigns killed dozens of others.

The elections were also marred by allegations of vote buying, ballot-box stuffing, and inflation of results, most noticeably in southeastern Nigeria - Jonathan's stronghold - where official results in the presidential election in some rural areas recorded close to 100 percent voter turnout.

A History of Election Violence

Between independence in 1960 and 1999, Nigeria produced only two elected governments - both later overthrown in military coups. Nigeria's military ruled the country for nearly 30 of its first 40 years of independence. However, in 1999, Nigeria made a transition to civilian rule. The 1999 elections, which brought a retired general, Olusegun Obasanjo, to power, were blighted by such widespread fraud that observers from the Carter Center concluded that "it is not possible for us to make an accurate judgment about the outcome of the presidential election."

Federal and state elections in 2003 were again marred by fraud as well as serious

incidents of violence that left at least 100 people dead and many others injured. Human Rights Watch found that members and supporters of the ruling party were responsible for the majority of abuses, though opposition parties also engaged in political violence. Most deaths occurred when opposing bands of armed gangs fought each other in an effort to control an area and displace supporters of the opposing party. Human Rights Watch documented how ruling party politicians in the oil-rich Niger Delta mobilized and funded armed groups to help rig elections. That led to a sustained increase in violence and criminality in the region.

Despite the abysmal record of the 1999 and 2003 elections, the government did not correct the problems in the next elections. Observers from the European Union described the 2007 elections, which brought Umaru Yar'Adua, a Muslim from northern Nigeria, to power, as among the worst they had witnessed anywhere in the world. Human Rights Watch estimates that at least 300 people were killed in violence linked to the 2007 elections.

Corrupt politicians, in many cases backed by mafia-like "godfathers," openly mobilized gangs of thugs to terrorize ordinary citizens and political opponents and to stuff or steal ballot boxes. The police were often present during such incidents but frequently turned a blind eye or, at times, participated in abuses. In other locations elections simply did not take place, yet the electoral commission reported ruling-party victories with high voter turnout.

Following Yar'Adua's death in May 2010 from natural causes, Goodluck Jonathan, his vice president, was sworn in as president. An internal zoning agreement within the ruling People's Democratic Party provides that a northerner should have held the presidency following the eight-year administration of Obasanjo, a Christian from southwest Nigeria.

Despite opposition by some of the northern leaders, Jonathan managed to secure the ruling party's ticket in the party primary in January 2011 and went on to sweep the predominately Christian south during the April elections. His main opponent, Muhammadu Buhari, the candidate for the Congress for Progressive Change, won the majority of votes in the largely Muslim north. The election left the country deeply divided on religious and ethnic lines.

A New Cycle of Violence

The day after the presidential election, held on April 16, Buhari's supporters launched demonstrations in the streets of northern Nigeria. The protests turned violent in 12 northern states as mobs burned the homes, vehicles, and properties of ruling party stalwarts, most of whom were Muslim, and traditional leaders who were seen to have backed the ruling party.

The rioters also began targeting and killing Christians and members of southern Nigerian ethnic groups, who were seen as supporting the ruling party, and burning churches across the north. As the riots spread, mobs of Christians in predominately Christian communities in Kaduna State retaliated by killing Muslims and burning their mosques and properties.

In Bauchi State, rioters targeted members of the National Youth Corps Service, who served as ad-hoc election staff. According to media reports and journalists interviewed by Human Rights Watch, on the afternoon of April 17 in Giade, a rural town in northern Bauchi State, rioters attacked the youth corps members in the town. The youth corps members, who were from southern Nigeria, ran to the local police station to seek refuge, but the rioters stormed the police station. The mob killed the police officer on duty and burned down the police station, the journalists said. They raped two of the female youth corps members then hacked them to death with machetes, along with five male youth corps members. In total, rioters killed ten youth corps members in the state.

Kaduna State, which is divided along religious and ethnic lines, suffered the highest death toll during the three days of rioting. The Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, most of whom are Muslim, make up the majority in northern Kaduna State, while southern Kaduna

State is dominated by predominately Christian ethnic groups. In the city of Kaduna, the state capital, the river that intersects the city serves as a symbolic divider for the largely segregated city, state, and nation.

Kaduna State has a history of violent inter-communal clashes but peace that had lasted since the last major outbreak of violence in 2002 was broken by the post-presidential election violence. It soon spread to sectarian bloodletting around the state. The following are some of the incidents of post-election violence recorded in Kaduna State:

- A lecturer at the Nuhu Bamalli Polytechnic, a college on the outskirts of the city of Zaria, described to Human Rights Watch how a mob of youth chanting pro-Buhari slogans cornered four Christian students and a Christian lecturer in the staff quarters of the campus and beat them to death with sticks, clubs, and machetes on April 17.
- In the city of Kaduna, Christians and Muslims who found themselves on the wrong side of the river during the riots were bludgeoned to death by marauding mobs. Churches and mosques were torched in the city. Civil society leaders said that Christian travelers were dragged out of their vehicles by mobs of Muslims and killed on the main road leading north of the city. Mobs of Christians also torched vehicles on the expressway leading through the city's southern neighborhoods, killing Muslim motorists.
- A Human Rights Watch researcher visited the town of Maraba Rido on the outskirts of the city of Kaduna. Dozens of houses and shops were razed to the ground, and the main mosque was torched, with anti-Islamic graffiti and the inscription "Jesus is Lord" inscribed on the burned-out walls of the mosque. According to one of the Muslim leaders, 28 Muslims were killed, while hundreds of others fled the area and as a result were unable to vote in the gubernatorial elections.
- A Human Rights Watch researcher returned to a polling place near the burned-out homes and mosque in Maraba Rido for the April 28 gubernatorial elections, after the violence. The posted results showed the ruling party candidate for governor, a Christian, received 441 votes, while the Muslim candidate for Buhari's Congress for Progressive Change failed to register a single vote. Similarly skewed results were found by a Human Rights Watch researcher in the town of Zonkwa where many Muslims were killed or fled.
- Men from the predominately-Christian Bajju ethnic group in the town of Zonkwa burned six of the town's mosques, as well as the homes, shops, and vehicles of Muslim residents. Witnesses said that violence began late in the afternoon of April 18 and continued throughout the night. By mid-morning on the following day, the Bajju men had killed or displaced nearly all of the town's Hausa-Fulani residents. One of the district heads acknowledged to Human Rights Watch: "The boys here made it total. They would not relent."
- According to one of the Muslim leaders in Zonkwa who participated in the burial of the victims, and showed Human Rights Watch photo documentation of the mass burial of corpses, 311 Muslims, nearly all of them men, were buried in a mass grave in Zonkwa later that week, while the remains of 24 others, many of their corpses charred beyond recognition, were buried in one of the town's wells. Christian leaders in Zonkwa told Human Rights Watch that 10 Christians had also been killed in the town and surrounding communities. No churches were destroyed.
- In the neighboring town of Kafanchan, clashes between Muslim and Christian youth continued unabated throughout the night of April 18. Christian and Muslims leaders told Human Rights Watch that by the next morning at least 20 Christians and 34 Muslims had been killed. The mobs torched hundreds of homes, shops, and vehicles, and razed to the ground the central market. Twenty-six mosques and four churches were burned or destroyed. One of the leaders from the Igbo ethnic group, the vast majority Christians from southeastern Nigeria, told Human Rights Watch that 11 Igbo residents were killed in Kafanchan, while 224 of their houses and 837 shops, many of them in the central market, were burned.

Failure to Break the Cycle of Violence

More than 15,700 people have been killed in inter-communal, political, and sectarian violence since Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999. In Kaduna State, at least 2,000 people were killed in sectarian clashes in 2000 sparked by Christian protests against the proposed introduction of Sharia law in the state. Two years later, sectarian violence sparked by Muslim protests linked to the Miss World beauty contest left some 250 people dead.

The human cost of such violence has been particularly high in neighboring Plateau State, where Human Rights Watch estimates that more than 3,800 people have been killed in inter-communal and sectarian clashes since 2001, at least 1,000 of them in 2010 alone.

Human Rights Watch has found that state and local government policies that discriminate against members of ethnic groups classified as "non-indigenes" - those who cannot trace their ancestry to what are said to be the original inhabitants of an area - have exacerbated existing inter-communal tensions in Nigeria. These discriminatory government policies have effectively relegated millions of residents to permanent second-class status.

Despite repeated outbreaks of inter-communal violence, federal and state government authorities, under the ruling party's control since 1999, have done little to address the root causes of the violence. The Nigerian authorities have failed to break the cycle of killings by holding accountable those responsible.

In southern Kaduna State, a civil servant told Human Rights Watch that he recognized some of the individuals who he saw kill his neighbors. But when he went to the police to file a report, the senior police officer at the station told him that "if the police started arresting people now, it would cause more problems." Instead the police advised the man to wait until a commission of inquiry is set up to investigate the violence.

Over the years, the federal and state governments have set up various committees and commissions of inquiry to investigate outbreaks of violence, but the reports from these bodies, and the occasional government white paper, have mostly been shelved. In the absence of accountability and effective redress, communities that have suffered violence frequently resort to vigilante justice and exact revenge by inflicting commensurate harm on members of other communities.

"Panels of inquiry have become a tunnel through which the government runs away from their responsibility to bring the culprits of violence to book," said Innocent Chukwuma, executive director of CLEEN Foundation, a civil society group that works on justice sector reform. "Going to these panels buys the government time and when the problem drops from the headlines they go back to business as usual."

Witness Accounts

A lecturer at the Nuhu Bamalli Polytechnic, a college on the outskirts of the city of Zaria in northern Kaduna State, described to Human Rights Watch how a mob of Muslim youth attacked and killed four Christian students and a Christian lecturer on April 17:

Between 10 a.m. and 12 p.m. they entered the school chanting slogans and shouting: "Where are the Christians that supported the ruling party?" When you see the mob, they were not in their senses. They had painted their faces black and were shouting that they needed "change" [the Congress for Progressive Change campaign slogan]. The mob had all sorts of weapons - machetes, sticks, and clubs. They started breaking the glass [windows] on the buildings. The students ran away but the mob pursued them into the staff quarters and they had nowhere to go. The mob beat them to death and hit them with machetes. Four Christian students and a Christian lecturer were killed. The lecturer was Yoruba. Three of the students and the lecturer died on the spot; the other student died at St. Luke's Anglican Hospital. About 200 students - both Christians and Muslims - were injured; eight students are still in the hospital. I helped take the dead and injured

to the hospital. The mobs also burned four of the staff houses. They said the lecturers had given money to the ruling party.

Between 12 and 1 p.m. the military arrived and started shooting in the air and the mob scattered. They arrested one person. The military gathered the students to the main football field and kept guard. There were several thousand students. They all slept that night on the football field.

In the small town of Matsirga in southern Kaduna State, Muslim leaders told Human Rights Watch that 39 Muslims were killed. A middle-aged man who lives in the town described to Human Rights Watch what he saw on the night of April 18:

Around 8 p.m. after Isha'a prayers we were sitting around our mosque eating with our neighbors. One of my sons told me that people had made a roadblock on the road entering our town. I called one of the Bajju [ethnic group] leaders [name withheld] and he told me this trouble is from Kaduna and he can't do anything. He said I should pack my family and go hide. But they had blocked the road so we couldn't leave. I stood by the gate with my family. Around 10 p.m. I was told that the Bajju youth had set fire to one of the houses. I saw the fire in the distance. Some time past 10 p.m., a group of Bajju youth came and set fire to my neighbor's house. They were large in number. Some had sticks, machetes, and catapults. I recognized one of them. I called out to him, "What is going on?" He said, "Today you will face the music." Another Bajju youth had a double barrel gun. My neighbor Yahaya pleaded with him saying, "Why are you doing this?" But he shot Yahaya at close range. He was gasping for breath and died. I ran to my house and told my family to run. I climbed a mango tree by my house. I saw the Bajju come and set fire to my house. I saw them burn my house, my car, my neighbor's house, and the neighborhood mosque.

Around 3 a.m., after all the houses were burned, I climbed down from the tree and crawled on the ground until our burial ground. I then ran to the river about two kilometers away. I hid in the water for about an hour. When it started getting light, I crawled out of the river and climbed a nearby mountain and hid. I saw the Bajju people looking for us. I saw them kill three people by the river with machetes and an axe. I could see them but they couldn't see me....

I later went back to my house with the police and army. One of my sons was killed, but my wives and other children survived. One of his [my son's] friends told me he saw the Bajju youth cutting him with machetes. They didn't kill women; they only killed men and boys. Some of the corpses we saw were burned. We couldn't identify them. Everything was burned to ashes, all of my documents, everything was burned to ashes. We have no other place than here. I was born in Matsirga.

Human Rights Watch interviewed two witnesses who described how a police officer shot and killed Suliman Adamu inside a house in the Tudun Wada neighborhood of Kaduna city on the morning of April 18. A construction worker described what he saw:

Around 8:30 p.m. on Sunday night [April 17], the day after the elections, people started burning tires [in the streets]. The police came and started shooting and we ran away. On Monday morning, around 8:30 to 9 a.m., some people started coming out and burning tires again. The police returned and pursued one of the people into Suli's [Suliman's] compound. Two policemen entered the compound. One was in mufti [civilian dress], he had a red Manchester jersey, and was wearing a helmet. The other police officer was wearing a black police uniform with a helmet. I saw one shoot his gun through the window. I heard Suliman yell. The policeman then shot again through the door. I heard the other policeman ask him why he shot him inside his house. He answered, "If I shoot him, I can't miss; I can't waste my ammunition for nothing." The policemen then left. Before

we could take him to the hospital he was dead.

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