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Nigeria: Investigate Massacre, Step Up Patrols

Hundreds Killed by Mobs in Villages in Central Nigeria

March 8, 2010

(Dakar) - Nigeria's acting president should make sure that the massacre of at least 200 Christian villagers in central Nigeria on March 7, 2010, is thoroughly and promptly investigated and that those responsible are prosecuted, Human Rights Watch said today. The acting president should also ensure that the military and the police act swiftly to protect civilians of all ethnicities at risk of further attacks or reprisal killings, including by conducting regular patrols throughout the vulnerable region, Human Rights Watch said.

The latest killings in Nigeria's restive Plateau State took place in the early morning hours of March 7, when groups of men armed with guns, machetes, and knives attacked residents of the villages of Dogo Nahawa, Zot, and Ratsat, 10 kilometers south of Jos, the capital of Plateau State. The dead included scores of women and children.

"This kind of terrible violence has left thousands dead in Plateau State in the past decade, but no one has been held accountable," said Corinne Dufka, senior West Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. "It's time to draw a line in the sand. The authorities need to protect these communities, bring the perpetrators to book, and address the root causes of violence."

Witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch said the attacks were committed by Muslim men speaking Hausa and Fulani against Christians, mostly of the Berom ethnicity. Civil society leaders in Jos said that the attacks appeared to be in retaliation for previous attacks against Muslim communities in the area and the theft of cattle from Fulani herdsmen. On January 19, more than 150 Muslim residents were killed in an attack on the nearby town of Kuru Karama.

The witnesses said that groups of armed men attacked the largely Christian village of Dogo Nahawa at around 3 a.m. After surrounding the town, they hunted down and attacked Christian residents, killing many as they tried to flee and burning many others alive. The witnesses said they believed some of the attackers had previously lived in their villages before fleeing during inter-communal tension in 2001, 2008, and earlier in 2010.

Witnesses to the killings, community leaders from Jos, and journalists who visited the villages told Human Rights Watch that they saw bodies, including corpses of young children and babies, inside houses, strewn around the streets, and in the pathways leading out of the villages. A Christian leader who participated today in a mass burial of 67 bodies in Dogo



Villagers look at bodies of victims of attacks lying in a mass grave in the Dogo Nahawa village near Jos, the capital of Plateau State in central Nigeria, on March 8, 2010.

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"They Do Not Own This Place"

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Corinne Dufka, senior West Africa researcher
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Nahawa said that about 375 people are dead or still missing. Journalists and community leaders who visited the town said that many homes, cars, and other property were burned and destroyed.

"These attacks we see as reprisal attacks from the crisis in January," the Plateau State police spokesperson, Mohammed Lerama, told Human Rights Watch. According to official police figures, the police have so far arrested 98 people in connection with the attacks.

Goodluck Jonathan, who on February 9 was named acting president by Nigeria's National Assembly, responded to the January violence by deploying additional troops to the streets of Jos and surrounding communities. The military presence and patrols have been largely limited to major roads and towns and have not protected many of the smaller communities."

After the worst of the mid-January violence in and around the nearby town of Kuru Karama, Jonathan pledged to bring the perpetrators to justice. "Those found to have engineered, encouraged or fanned the embers of this crisis through their actions or pronouncements will be arrested and speedily brought to justice," he said. "We will not allow anyone to hide under the canopy of group action to evade justice. Crime, in all its gravity, is an individual responsibility, not a communal affair."

While Jonathan's commitments are a step in the right direction, they need to be followed with credible investigations and prosecutions, Human Rights Watch said.

Background

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. The outbreak of violence south of Jos on March 7 is the latest in a series of deadly incidents in and around 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 Plateau 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. Sectarian clashes broke out again in Jos on January 17 and quickly spread to neighboring communities, including Kuru Karama.

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 that held public hearings, but the report has not been made public. Following these incidents, police and judicial authorities have not conducted thorough investigations or prosecutions of those responsible for the violence.

Human Rights Watch urged the Nigerian government to take concrete steps to end policies that discriminate against "non-indigenes" - people who cannot trace their ancestry to those said to be the original inhabitants of an area - which fuel tension and underlie many of these conflicts. The federal government should pass and enforce legislation prohibiting government discrimination against non-indigenes in all matters that are not purely cultural or related to traditional leadership institutions, Human Rights Watch said.

Non-indigenes are openly denied the right to compete for government jobs and academic scholarships. Members of the

largely Muslim Hausa ethnic group are classified as non-indigenes in Jos and surrounding communities, though many have lived there for several generations.

Selected Witness Accounts

A resident of Dogo Nahawa described to Human Rights Watch what happened:

Dogo is a farming village several kilometers from Jos. They came at around 3 a.m. to attack our village. When they arrived, they immediately started shooting, so many of us ran outside to see what happened. Then others attacked us with machetes, killing so many. It was not easy for us to escape. I ran into the bushes and hid - from there I saw them killing. They killed about 150 children, 80 women, 50 men in Dogo Nahawa. There were about 200 of them armed with guns and cutlasses. After running away, I could see the burning of our houses and heard our women and children screaming as they were being killed. I recognized a few of [the attackers'] voices. I believe they were those who had lived here before. I heard them speaking in both Hausa and Fulani, saying, "The time has come, you will see." There was no warning for this attack. I was very lucky to escape. I saw many people being cut down as I was running. The attack lasted until around 4:30 [a.m.] when the military showed up. When the attackers saw their lights they disappeared - the attackers were on foot.

A 25-year-old student described to Human Rights Watch what he saw in Dogo Nahawa:

I was in the village - around 3:30 a.m. on Sunday - when the Hausa-Fulani militants came. There were many of them, maybe a few hundred. Many were dressed in camouflage like fake soldiers. Their heads were wrapped up in cloth so we couldn't recognize them.

They came with guns, ammunition, and machetes. One group surrounded our village and started shooting. The other ones came closer in and then when we ran out of our houses - they attacked us with machetes. Many women remained inside the houses, which is maybe why so many died. I saw many villagers - women, children, and some men - hacked to death. I lost one of my daughters, who was 7 years old. Another one was injured by a machete and is now in hospital.

I escaped by climbing a mango tree and from there I could see them killing, setting fire to the houses and destroying our property. When killing people I heard them saying, let us destroy all the houses and when they killed people they said, "Allahu Akbar." We know the attackers by their language - they were speaking both Hausa and Fulani. Some used to live in our village, but they left. Before, we were living together with them, living in harmony - no crisis, no trouble... some left our village in 2001, others in 2008, others left after the recent crisis in January. The army came at around 4:30 [a.m.]. The attackers came on foot using footpaths. They killed livestock and destroyed homes. We are left with nothing, and we feel very unsafe.

A driver who was in the village of Ratsat on the morning of the attack described to Human Rights Watch what he saw:

I am a driver, but now I can't work because my car was burned in the attack. Ratsat is about a kilometer

from Dogo. The attackers started their operation simultaneously. We know this because we heard gunshots in Dogo at just the same time as we heard them in my village. I ran out, it was confusing. I could see the flames starting up. Many people - perhaps even 200 - were killed in the village. I lost my father. I found his body outside his house. His head had been completely destroyed, beaten in. I think the attackers were dressed in black... and some in military [uniforms]. It was dark and we were very afraid. The military finally came around 4:30 [a.m.] or so. Some [of the attackers] spoke both in Fulani and in our language, Berom. I heard them say in both languages, "We've come... you will see now... we will destroy you." Some of them lived with us here before, but they left in January.

<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/03/08/nigeria-investigate-massacre-step-patrols>

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