



Persecution in Nigeria

By Doug Bandow on 5.18.12 @ 6:07AM

Boko Haram's murderous crusade against Christians.

Long a troubled nation, Nigeria now risks religious war. So far the killing essentially runs one way: Islamic extremists kill Christians. President Goodluck Jonathan has responded with good intentions and occasional arrests, including of a terrorist leader last Friday. However, if the government is unable to stop the killing the country's future will be at risk.

Like so many other former colonies, Nigeria stumbled almost immediately after gaining independence. Blessed with oil, it has suffered through multiple corrupt and repressive governments. It now is a functioning democracy, but the political process is complicated by the need to balance the ambitions of the Muslim north and Christian south.

Maintaining political peace has been made more urgent by persistent sectarian violence. The State Department emphasizes that "The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections." Unfortunately, the lack of state persecution does not protect Nigerians against private violence.

Observed the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in its most recent report, "Since 1999, more than 14,000 Nigerians have been killed in religiously-related violence between Muslims and Christians. The government of Nigeria continues to fail to prevent and contain acts of religiously-related violence, prevent reprisal attacks, or bring those responsible for such violence to justice." Muslim-dominated states in northern Nigeria also have applied Sharia law as part of their criminal codes and discriminated "against minority communities of Christians and Muslims."

The greatest threat today is the group Boko Haram, which has been active for three years. The group now appears to have at least some contacts with al Qaeda affiliates and some members have been discovered in Mali. Unfortunately, the organization has been steadily expanding its reach. The State Department's latest religious freedom report observed that

"Violence, tension, and hostility between Christians and Muslims increased, particularly in the Middle Belt [divided roughly equally between Muslims and Christians], exacerbated by 'indigene' (native) and settler laws, discriminatory employment practices, and resource competition."

International Christian Concern regularly puts Nigeria in its Hall of Shame and similarly reported increased attacks on Christians in 2010 in the Middle Belt. According to ICC, "The year's worst attack occurred on March 7, as Muslims invaded villages around the [Plateau state] capital city of Jos. The mobs attacked sleeping families in their homes at 2 a.m. with machetes. More than 500 Christians were murdered that day, most of whom were women and children." Killings of Christians continued in nearby villages throughout the year.

Since then the situation has worsened. Observed State: "Violence between Christian and Muslim communities increased in several regions arising from complex factors, including economic disparity, ethnic identity, and seasonal migration patterns. Acute communal violence in the Middle Belt heightened tensions between religious groups." Yet, "even in areas outside the Middle Belt that did not otherwise experience violence, tensions remained between Christians and Muslims."

The growing violence is a genie that cannot easily be returned to the bottle. Noted the Commission: "The past year saw a dramatic rise in sectarian or religiously-related violence." Post-election riots in the north against the election of Jonathan, a Christian, killed some 800 people. "Although triggered by political issues, the post-election violence quickly became sectarian. In addition, Boko Haram, a militant group that espouses an extreme and violent interpretation of Islam, has been emboldened by the climate of impunity."

The group, whose name means "Western education is sacrilege," is deadly serious. No bromides about representing a "religion of peace." Added the Commission: "Boko Haram has shifted its tactics and emphasis by targeting, killing, and bombing Christians and Christian clergy and threatening to kill all remaining Christians in the north, while continuing its attacks against government officials, as well as killing hundreds of Muslims, including Muslim religious leaders who spoke out against the group." Also targeted have been Western-style schools in the north, which provide an education beyond memorization of the Koran.

Boko Haram does some of its killing retail, one by one. In March in the Muslim-majority city of Maiduguri, the terrorist group killed the 79-year-old mother of a local pastor. Her throat was slit with a note in Arabic placed on her chest, proclaiming that "We will get you soon."

However, the group also murders wholesale, attacking church services. For instance, April was not a good month for Nigerian Christians. Reported the *Economist*: "In Kano, a city in northern Nigeria, gunmen on motorbikes killed at least 20 Christian worshippers in a university lecture theater where churches hold their weekly services. They threw

small bombs into the church before shooting those trying to flee. In another attack on a church service in the northeast town of Maiduguri shooters opened fire, killing five people including the priest. Seven people were killed on Monday in a bomb targeting a police commissioner's convoy in the eastern town of Jalingo in the usually peaceful Taraba state."

It could have been worse. On Easter Sunday in the city of Kaduna a suicide bomber was blocked from getting into the compound of two Protestant churches. Instead, he detonated his bomb on a nearby road, which still killed 41 people. Later the same day there was a bombing in the city of Jos, which killed one person and injured others. Last Christmas 44 people were killed by a church bombing in Abuja, the nation's capital.

No one claimed responsibility for the April murders, though they looked like the work of Boko Haram. However, warned the *Economist*, "it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell when Boko Haram is responsible for such violence and when other groups, inspired by their methods, are to blame." Boko Haram has destroyed an incredible 350 churches throughout northern Nigeria over the past year. So far this year the group is estimated to have killed nearly 500 people.

Nigeria's Catholic leaders have called on Muslim leaders to speak out and act to end the violence. Like in Pakistan many Nigerian Muslims send their children to Islamiyya, or religious, schools, which provide few practical skills. Educator Rotimi Eytayo observed: "Those who stop going to school don't get education, they become a menace." In a country with too few jobs some of these ill-educated and unskilled appear open to Boko Haram's call.

In March Boko Haram abandoned preliminary talks with the government. Unfortunately, the group has few negotiable objectives. It insists on the release of all followers from jail and has variously proposed creation of an Islamic state in the north and imposition of strict Sharia law across all of Nigeria. Last month it released a video threatening to "devour" Jonathan and "end" his government after he pledged to bring the group under control by mid-year. The group proclaimed that it would "never give up as we fight the infidels." Apparently political objectives are secondary: Boko Haram's members simply want to kill Christians.

While visiting Germany in April to promote trade and investment, President Jonathan argued that "The security situation in Nigeria is being blown out of proportion. It is exaggerated." Hundreds of dead Nigerians probably would disagree.

In fact, the Jonathan government has reacted with desperation. In January the *Wall Street Journal* reported: "In response to the mounting attacks, President Goodluck Jonathan last month authorized searches without warrants, indefinite detention, and thousands of roadblocks." Moreover, he has "raised police and military spending to one-fifth of government outlays -- the largest amount Nigeria has ever spent on security."

The authorities can claim some successes, but the group appears unaffected and the slaughter continues. Two weeks ago security forces killed the suspected organizer of recent attacks on churches. Last weekend the police in Kano said they captured the local Boko Haram operational commander. Yet nothing is likely to change. Catholic Archbishop Ade Job has appealed for foreign help: "It is apparent that, if we depend only on our available active security agents, we shall not make much progress."

A religious war threatens Nigeria, yet the Obama administration has downplayed the religious roots of the conflict, preferring to emphasize the malign impact of poverty and poor governance. At a recent Senate hearing, Assistant Secretary of State Johnnie Carson made the rather astonishing claim that "religion is not the primary driver behind extremist violence in Nigeria." He should read the State Department's own report on religious liberty.

While the U.S. cannot intervene in the conflict, it should declare Boko Haram to be a terrorist organization. Washington also should encourage the Nigerian government to act vigorously to protect all of its citizens. If the Jonathan government fails to do so, a nation of 170 million could violently crack apart. Nigeria already suffered one bloody civil war during its short life. The humanitarian consequences of another one could be catastrophic.