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NIGERIA: SIX THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT THE DEADLY FULANI VIOLENCE IN THE MIDDLE BELT REGION

Summary:

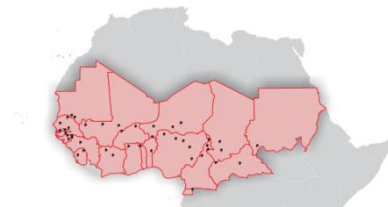
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NIGERIA: SIX THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT THE DEADLY FULANI VIOLENCE IN THE MIDDLE BELT REGION

In Northern Nigeria, targeted violence against Christians does not come only from Islamic Boko Haram militants. Muslim Fulani herders have caused unimaginable suffering for Christians in the Middle Belt region. This article offers background information.

1. The Fulani are an unreached Muslim people

Just over 38 million people belong to the larger Fulani cluster of ethnic groups found in pockets across 19 Central and West African countries. They speak a variety of languages including Hausa, English, French and Arabic and are the world's largest nomadic group roaming this large area in search of grazing for their cattle.



With less than 1% professing Christians among them, they are yet unreached with the gospel. Although there are varying degrees of dedication throughout Fulani society, 99% follow Islam¹.

2. They are in conflict with farmers in Northern Nigeria's strategic Middle Belt

The Middle Belt² is part of Muslim dominated northern Nigeria. Unlike the Hausa Muslim dominated far northern states, the Middle Belt hosts a diversity of peoples and



¹ See: <https://joshuaproject.net/clusters/173>.

² Including Kwara, Kogi, Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Niger, Taraba and Adamawa States as well as the southern parts of Kaduna, Kebbi, Bauchi, Gombe and Borno states

cultures. It is a melting pot of ethno-religious groups that have long coexisted. It is also the center of Christian presence in the North. Many regard this area as the bread basket of northern Nigeria. As the Fulani herders increasingly migrate southward, they have come into conflict with the mostly Christian grain farmers over resources.

3. Although socio-economic factors drive the conflict, a religious motive is clear

Increasing desertification drives the Fulani gradually southward, intensifying pressure on already scarce resources.³ Herders have migrated here in a virtually unchecked way from neighboring West African countries (especially Niger) suffering drought. But there is more to the conflict than these socio-economic factors. In the attacks Christians are targeted and Muslims mostly spared. Open Doors research found that 88% of victims in Benue State were Christians. In Taraba State, 70% of the victims were Christians. In Nasarawa State 75% of the victims were Christians.⁴ “Christians are being driven out of their ancestral homes, and those who refused and stayed were indiscriminately targeted. The vacated lands are being grabbed by those who are responsible for the displacement.”⁵

In the history of the Fulani people there have been waves of radicalization combining the conquering of land with expansion of their religion. The Fulani played a role in the jihad of Usman dan Fodio (1804-1815), who conquered parts of the Middle Belt and incorporated them into the Sokoto caliphate that lasted until 1903. In recent decades, the Fulani have again grown increasingly radical due to the influx of radical Islamic preaching by missionaries from Saudi Arabia and Iran. The attacks can be seen as a continuation of jihad seeking an Islamic state throughout Nigeria.

“The Fulani want to subjugate Christians, disintegrate the country, weaken the Gospel and destroy the social and economic life of the people. There is a hidden agenda targeted at the Christian majority of southern Kaduna. This jihad is well-funded, well-planned and executed by agents of destabilization,” the Catholic Bishops of Kaduna, an area that suffered many attacks in recent years, recently stated.⁶

According to the expansionist principle of *Dar al Islam (house of Islam)* everything belongs to Allah directly and to his followers indirectly, including the land where they want to let their cattle graze. “They believe it is right for them to take those resources by force from infidels and apostates,” explained an Open Doors West Africa researcher.

4. The attacks have been brutal and increasing

The US Department of Defense’s [Africa Centre for Strategic Studies](#)⁷ estimated that by January 2017 more than 60,000 people died since 2001 in pastoralist-related violence in Nigeria alone. Thousands

³ See: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Crushed-but-not-defeated-Revision-Summary-Report.pdf> (password: freedom).

⁴ See: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Nigeria-Benue-State-Short-version-WWR-2017.pdf>, <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Violent-Conflict-in-Taraba-State-2013-2015.pdf>, <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Migration-and-Violent-Conflict-in-Divided-Societies-March-2015.pdf> (password: freedom).

⁵ See: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Ethnic-cleansing-in-the-Middle-Belt-Region-of-Nigeria-2015.pdf> (password: freedom).

⁶ See: [WWM: Nigerian Human Rights Commission calls on president to stop callous Kaduna Killings.](#)

⁷ See: <http://africacenter.org/spotlight/africa-pastoralists-battleground-terrorism/>, 11 January 2017.

have been injured in the attacks and hundreds of women have been kidnapped. They have destroyed countless homes and churches and seized large swathes of land and property.⁸

Open Doors research further shows that violence increased in the run-up to the 2015 presidential elections and persisted since President Buhari, himself a Fulani, became president. Open Doors estimates that the group has killed as many as 6,500 people in Southern Kaduna, Plateau, Nasarawa, Benue and Taraba states between 2013 and 2015 alone. The local government areas of Jama'a, Kachia, Kagarko, Kaura and Sanga in southern Kaduna have been most adversely affected. Sources indicate that more than 50 villages have been attacked in the last 12 months alone.

5. Christians say the government is failing them

"We are dismayed by the inaction of the Federal Government to the carnage and destruction caused by the Fulani herdsmen against legitimate native land owners and farmers across the country. ... For years, the Fulani herdsmen have been murdering innocent Nigerians with impunity. ...The response of the government to the menace of the Fulani herdsmen has to date been tepid and indifferent," the Christian Elders Forum said in March 2016⁹.

"The crisis here has persisted because of the way and manner the Federal and State governments, as well as the Security Agents are handling it," denounced Joseph Bagobiri, Bishop of Kafanchan, Southern Kaduna. "...Many of us are disappointed to see that our political leaders are taking sides and known to be supporting directly or indirectly the Fulani themselves and that is why they are fast losing the support and trust of the people".¹⁰

"If anything, the government has shown outright partisanship in favor of the herdsmen, to the disappointment of the majority of southern Kaduna indigenes and Christians," the Catholic bishops of Kaduna announced. "In most of these attacks, the military stands aloof and watches while our people are being massacred. ...In the Godogodo and Pasakori attacks, for example, the military merely watched and supervised the burning of our homes. When the youth mobilized to repel the attackers, the soldiers deliberately blocked them from entering the town."¹¹ These claims were confirmed by eyewitness reports Open Doors gathered following the attacks.

"The intervention of the Nigerian government has been slow and haphazard. No attempt was made to address key issues. No herdsmen were held accountable for the atrocities already committed; there was no discussion of prosecution for perpetrators, nor of compensation, nor provision of security for victims. Many communities were left displaced and fearful, without any security," writes Atta Brukindo in a [World Watch Monitor report](#).¹²

⁸ See: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Crushed-but-not-defeated-Revision-Summary-Report.pdf> (password: freedom).

⁹ See: <http://www.canng.org/news-and-events/news/46-conflict-of-ideologies-as-the-greatest-obstacle-to-peace-unity-and-development-in-nigeria>.

¹⁰ See: Agenzia Fides, 28 March 2017.

¹¹ [Nigerian Human Rights Commission Calls on President to Stop Callous Kaduna Killings](#)

¹² See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/10/nigerian-fulani-herdsmens-attacks-continue-amidst-government-inaction/>.

“The administration of President Buhari has been very slow to recognize the severity of the problem and come up with a plan to address it. While President Buhari had made it a priority for the Nigerian armed forces to defeat Boko Haram in northern Nigeria and demanded that this be accomplished in a relatively short period of time, he has paid little attention in comparison to the situation in the Middle Belt,” writes Open Doors research experts¹³.

“A government cannot solve a problem that it has not recognized and is not paying attention to. The neglect of the situation has meant that the attacks by the Fulani militia are becoming more deadly and sophisticated. ...There seems to be little intelligence and information gathered by the government to understand the source of the problem and how it has evolved and if there is more to the conflict than meets the eye. More importantly, the persistent failure of the government to secure its borders, to control the flow of weapons and its failure to provide protection to the communities that are being systematically wiped out is a colossal failure that is having very tragic consequences. There also seems to be a lack of urgency in the government’s response to the situation.”

6. A little help goes a long way

Although the realities of this situation can be overwhelming, Open Doors supports Christian communities that face attacks from Fulani herdsmen by providing basic services like clinics, boreholes and schools as well as crisis relief for people who had to flee their communities. Churches are also trained in how to respond to persecution as well as stand strong in their own faith through discipleship training.

“My house was totally burned down in the Fulani crisis. I have been going from house to house begging for a bowl of corn to feed my children, but today I am given 100kg of maize all to myself, God indeed is faithful. May God bless every pocket that gave to see that we are being helped,” testified one beneficiary, Mary Lumumba.¹⁴

¹³ See: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Nigeria-Appraising-the-Buhari-administration-WWR.pdf> (password: freedom).

¹⁴ See video at <https://vimeo.com/230433284> (Password: SDGSDG).