

Muslim extremists continue Nigeria attacks on believers, Christian schools

KADUNA, Nigeria (BP and local reports) – In six days of attacks after the kidnapping of more than 125 Baptist school students in Kaduna, Nigeria, terrorists have killed at least 33 area civilians and burned four churches along with hundreds of nearby homes, witnesses told Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW).

The Evangelical Church Winning All, in the Abuyab community, and the Catholic church in Matyei village were among those identified as burned down in attacks July 8-13. Among the 33 fatalities is a Christian teacher, the Southern Kaduna Peoples Union said in a July 13 statement.

Pastor and humanitarian Gideon Agwom Mutum, a CSW Nigeria volunteer, received a written death threat from the terrorists who also threatened to destroy a school the pastor founded in Pasakori village in southern Kaduna. They proclaimed, “We will kill you like goats and your family. We know your house, your church, and even your family.”

Militant Muslim Fulani herdsmen are suspected in the July 5 kidnapping of 153 students from the Bethel Baptist Church school in Kaduna state, with 125 students still missing and considered in grave danger.

Parents of the missing students have vowed to protest until their children are returned. Nigeria President Muhammadu Buhari has ordered military, police, and intelligence agencies to work intensely and quickly for the students’ release, his media representative Garba Shehu said shortly after the kidnapping in the latest public statement by the government.

A surge in school kidnappings has prompted the government to order the temporary closure of schools in rural areas, judging them to be more vulnerable to attack. The crimes have revived a national debate over ransom payments, International Christian Concern (ICC) reported July 14.

Legislation criminalizing the payment of ransoms is being considered in Nigeria as an amendment to the Terrorism Prevention Act of 2011, ICC said.

In the July 5 kidnapping at the Bethel Baptist Church school, ICC Nigeria representative Nathan Johnson said the Kaduna state government's refusal to pay ransoms puts the students in grave danger and intensifies the need for their successful release.

A ransom paid by relatives secured the release of six students and two officials taken in a June 10 kidnapping at Nuhu Bamalli Polytechnic School in Kaduna, Reuters reported July 10.

Assailants have kidnapped more than 1,000 students from educational institutions in Nigeria in the past eight months, according to the ICC. Bandits are blamed for at least four mass kidnappings in Zamfara, Katsina, and Niger states – predominantly Muslim areas – since late December 2020.

Most of those students, totaling more than 600, were released. A Christian student was killed.

UNICEF estimates 1,100 schools are now closed across northwest Nigeria.

“The situation in education in Nigeria is probably at its biggest crisis point at the moment,” Peter Hawkins, UNICEF's representative in Nigeria, told Al Jazeera news service. “There are in the region of 13.2 million children out of school in total, which is the highest number globally.”

The mass abduction of school children in Nigeria intensified after extremist Muslim terrorist group Boko Haram kidnapped 276 predominantly Christian girls from a school in Chibok. About 100 of the young Chibok girls remain missing and it is believed many of them have been forced into marriage or sexual relationships with the terrorists.

The terrorist group's name, Boko Haram, can be translated, "Western education forbidden." The group has vowed to disrupt the education of Nigeria's youth – and especially female students – nationwide. Women are considered possessions by most radical Muslim groups and treated harshly.

The U.S. State Department in December named Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern for the first time in its annual report, citing systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations. In its 2021 World Watch List, persecution watchdog Open Doors ranked Nigeria ninth among the 50 most dangerous countries for Christians.