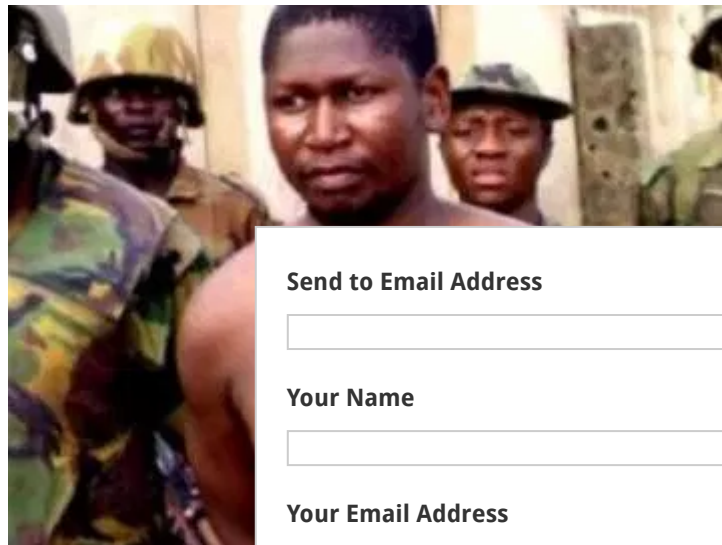


Church attacks in Northern Nigeria have added a new and bloody dimension to the intractable conflict with Boko Haram

LSE's Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed says that dialogue alone will not resolve the Nigerian government's stand-off with Boko Haram.

It feels like on a daily basis I hear of another Boko Haram attack in Northern Nigeria. Recently, Boko Haram has gone from targeting government institutions and security agencies to Christians (usually during church services).



Boko Haram found

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Although the first violent attack happened was arrested and later killed while still towards the end of 2010. On **Christmas Eve 2010** at least 80 people were killed, as a result of bombings in central Jos, two attacks on churches in Maiduguri, and violent reprisals. But it wasn't until I went to Northern Nigeria in the summer of 2011 that I realised the impact they had. While I was there, every other day the local radio stations would announce another Boko Haram attack or another Northern city facing curfew as a result of an attack or reprisals from an attack.

Since my visit in the summer of 2011, there has been a rise in the frequency of attacks. In **August**, the UN Headquarter in Abuja was bombed. In **November**, the city of Damaturu in Yobe experienced several bombings. On **Christmas Day**, bombs were set off across Nigeria, three targeted at churches.

In **2012**, church attacks have become a weekly occurrence. June saw three straight weekends of attacks. On **3 June**, a suicide bomber tried to drive his car full of explosives into a church during Sunday service in Yelwa, on the outskirts of the northern city of Bauchi. On **10 June**, gunmen opened fire during a service in Biu Town, in northeastern Borno state. On the same day in Jos, a suicide bomber blew himself up outside of a church. On **17 June**, Boko Haram also claimed responsibility for suicide attacks on three churches in Zaria and Kaduna. **A day after** the trio of church bombings, they struck churches in the city of Damaturu.

Why all these attacks? Boko Haram wants to establish a fully **Islamic state** in Northern Nigeria, including the implementation of sharia (Islamic) law, and eradicate Western influences from society. They will continue to attack until the Nigerian Government accepts this.

Such attacks have provoked reprisals from Nigeria's Christian community. In Kaduna, after the trio of church bombings on 17 June, young Christians took to the streets in **violent protests**. More reprisals might occur if the attacks continue, as Nigerians are increasingly losing faith in the Government's ability to control the situation. The Chairman of the South East Chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) made this clear when he said that "it seems that the present security of Nigeria cannot curtail the carnage" and declared that it would **retaliate and defend its members** through war if the bombings continue. **Christian and Muslim leaders** have also tried to stop the religious violence from escalating. In an open letter to the Government, Jama'atu Nasril Islam, an umbrella group for Muslim organisations in Nigeria, condemned the church bombings in Jos and Biu describing them as "barbaric".

Meanwhile, Nigeria's government has had problems handling the attacks. One of the Government's responses has been imposing **a state of emergency** in local government areas that have been affected. The use of military force is another approach.

In June, Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan, said that Boko Haram was "attacking churches to instigate religious crisis" that will only serve to "destabilise government". Pledging that Nigeria would halt the violence he said the Government was "open to dialogue", but not with "faceless people". The Government has attempted dialogue before. In March, the Government held its first **indirect meeting with Boko Haram**, meeting mediators to discuss a **possible ceasefire**. This fell apart, when **mediator Dr Ibrahim Datti Ahmed**, withdrew, as he doubted the Government's sincerity after information was leaked.

Also in June, the President fired his Minister of Defense Alhaji Bello Haliru Mohammed and replaced National Security Adviser, General Andrew Owoye Azazi, with Colonel Sambo Dasuki. The reasons behind the change were the need for "new persons" and "tactics" in the fight against Boko Haram. Recently, Colonel Dasuki **visited Maiduguri and Damaturu**, as well as **Jos and Kaduna** (on his tour of Boko Haram's troubled areas in the North), and reiterated the fact that the Government might be moving towards dialogue and negotiation. How effective will dialogue be if Boko Haram is adamant that the Government accepts its aim of creating an Islamic state?

With Boko Haram staging regular and deadly attacks, especially towards churches, and with the growing sectarian violence, it is clear that Nigeria needs to find a way to end the violence. If the Government believes that dialogue is the answer, it can only be effective if it happens alongside incentives targeted at issues of poverty and development, particularly in the North.

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