

An analysis of the current crises in Northern Nigeria

An interview with Dr Khataza Gondwe

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Dr Gondwe, could you please put the recent violent incidents in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria, in context?

The current violence in Jos cannot be viewed in isolation. Violence with a religious component has been occurring sporadically in northern and central Nigeria since 1987. However, chronic unrest in these areas began with the initial election of Obasanjo in 1999 and the subsequent Shari'a crisis. The 2010 violence in Jos needs to be viewed within this wider context.

Reports in western media often portray Christians in Jos either as the aggressors or as equally responsible for the violence. What is your perspective?

There has been a lot of inaccurate information in the media. Take, for example, the incident in Kuru Karama, or Kuru Jenta. Initially, the story as narrated by Human Rights Watch¹, the BBC and others appeared valid, namely, that Christian attackers, or rather, attackers who may have had Christian allegiances, brutally murdered up to 150 members of this Muslim community, stuffing many of their bodies into wells. However, upon closer inspection, several questions arose.

Kuru Karama, like all communities, is structured thus: there is a district head who answers to the Local Government Council Chairman, who is in turn responsible to the Governor. The name of Kuru Karama's District Head is Patrick Mandung, and he holds the

¹ Nigeria: Investigate Massacre, Step Up Patrols; Hundreds Killed by Mobs in Villages in Central Nigeria, Human Rights Watch, 8 March 2010, <http://tinyurl.com/HRW-2010>.

title of Gwom Rwei. Beneath him and directly answerable to him is the village head, then beneath come the heads of the various tribal communities living in the area.

In Kuru Karama, the Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba and other tribes each have their respective community leaders, but these people only have a say amongst their own ethnic group. However, those in charge of the entire people within the villages are the village heads, who are answerable to the local Gwom Rwei.

Western organisations covering Kuru Karama appear to have spoken only to the leader of Kuru Karama's Hausa-Fulani community, not to the village head, who ought to have been one of their primary ports of call. They therefore received and issued a one-sided version of events. Any investigation into this case ought to have included a weighing up of evidence from all parties to the conflict, regardless of their religious or ethnic background.

A press release by the Kuru Development Association², issued in response to the reports in the western press, underlines this point, and indicates the deep disappointment at international coverage of the violence in Kuru Karama. In it, the Development Association decries the one-sidedness of journalists and researchers who covered the story. Worse still, the media's version inflamed sentiments in the Muslim world, causing the head of Al Qaeda in the Maghreb to issue an offer to train and arm Nigerian Muslims.³

So, what are the main reasons to doubt the conventional reading in the media of events in Kuru Karama?

First of all, as the Citizens Monitoring Group⁴ clearly states, Kuru Jenta/Karama was a multi-ethnic village with people drawn from Urhobo, Tiv, Tangale, Ngas, Maghavul, Kanuri, Yoruba, Igbo, Nupe, Hausa and Berom tribes. The population included Christians, Muslims, and others from a variety of tribes, even though the Muslims

² "The Media Reportage of the 2010 Jos Conflict", Press Release from the Kuru Development Association, c/o Gwon Rwei Kuru Palace, Kuru, Jos South Local Government Area, received 1 February 2010.

³ North Africa Qaeda offers to help Nigerian Muslims, Reuters, 1 February 2010. <http://tinyurl.com/monitor-2010>.

⁴ Plateau Under Attack – Jos Crisis 2010, Citizens Monitoring Group, February 2010. Particularly see p 64, footnote 4). <http://tinyurl.com/citizens-2010>.

were in the majority. There were at least three mosques and four churches in the community.

The village head, Mr. Ajala Gambo, a non-Muslim, was also forced to flee the “Christian attackers”. His own house was set ablaze during the attack, and as I have said, he was never sought out for an interview by any of the agencies that reported this as a massacre by Christians. He too has expressed deep disappointment at the behaviour of international media and agencies. They never asked for him, or for the security men that were stationed there at the time of the violence. Mr. Gambo also claims that most of the burnt houses and possessions shown on video belonged to Christian villagers rather than Muslims.

Further, according to the Citizens Monitoring Group, the Muslim inhabitants of Kuru Karama were well armed with guns and ammunition. This was never mentioned in media broadcasts. During a visit to the area, CSW was shown the remains of a house owned by a man named Dambaturi where these arms were being stockpiled, allegedly in preparation for an attack on the non-Muslim villagers of Kuru Karama that was to occur despite a peace meeting convened by local security men between community leaders on the morning of the violence. We learned that as church leaders criss-crossed the village appealing for calm and stating that peace had been brokered, non-Muslim youths from the surrounding area that had gotten wind of impending violence were beginning to descend on the village to strike pre-emptively, while Muslim youths gathered at Dambaturi’s house, where machetes and guns were passed out to them to shouts of “Allah u Akbar”. The two groups met head to head at the village’s commercial centre, where battle commenced, destruction was great, and the Muslim group came off worse. Later, and not for the first time in Nigeria’s history – as any Christian living in Kano City in 2004 can attest⁵ – bodies were discovered in wells. While the Muslim community is variously reported as claiming to have suffered up to 150 casualties, we were informed by church leaders that they could not give definitive figures as the bodies were not identified before removal, and the many missing members of their congregations could either be dead or displaced.

⁵ Nigeria deploys soldiers to quell religious killings, Declan Walsh, *The Independent*, 14 May 2004. <http://tinyurl.com/indep-2010>.

This is interesting, as in the western media the attacks on Dogo Nahauwa and other villages that took place in March and April were depicted as retaliation for the Kuru Karama incident.

The word “retaliation” is frequently mentioned to explain violence in Northern Nigeria that is committed by the Fulani. The assumption that the attacks on Dogo Nahauwa and other Christian villages were in retaliation for Kuru Karama was initially mooted only by the western media. However, the people arrested for these attacks did not speak in terms of reprisal, but said instead that they were hired to do a job.

It appears, an effort is underway to shift blame for the genesis of this year’s outbreak of crisis away from its actual cause, and onto an event where the Fulani can be portrayed as the primary victims.

In reality, the attack on Kuru Karama was not the starting point of the recent spate of violence. On 18 January 2010, a significant number of armed young Fulani Muslims who claimed to be undertaking repairs on a house, attacked a group of church goers and triggered this violence. There followed a string of subsequent episodes, all preceding Kuru Karama, including attacks on non-Muslim communities in Jos North, Bukuru Central and Bisichi, as a consequence of which these areas are now largely inhabited solely by Muslims. Surprisingly, there are no similar media claims that Kuru Karama was retaliation for these incidents – yet that ought to be the logical conclusion of those espousing the retaliation theory.

The latter seems to indicate that there was indeed a religious agenda driving the violence. Do you agree?

It would be folly to deny there is a religious element to the violence in Plateau State and elsewhere in northern and central Nigeria. How else would you explain, for example, what occurred in Jos in late 2008, when after a peaceful Election Day in Jos, violence broke out in the early hours prior to the announcement of results? The violence was blamed on election rigging, however, not one political party headquarters or politician was attacked. Instead, the targets were the homes of pastors and other Christians, churches, and particularly non-Muslim men and boys.⁶ More recently, in Jigawa State (Kazaure), a Muslim motorist died after being assaulted by a Muslim traffic officer,

⁶ Nigeria: Death Toll in Jos Riot Rises to 350, allAfrica.com, 30 November 2008, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200811300001.html>.

yet churches were targeted and set on fire.⁷ Then in June, attempts by the Plateau State government to enforce the registration of commercial motorcycles resulted not only in the death of a policeman, but also in an attack on a church.⁸

You have been referring to Fulani Muslims, not just Muslims. So, what is the role of ethnicity in the conflict?

The Hausa-Fulani, and particularly the Fulani, are the sole common ethnic denominator in the violence in these areas. In Plateau State they are involved in attacks on every indigenous tribe, as occurred most recently in Mazah, ancestral home of the Anaguta.⁹ Nevertheless, it is now accepted wisdom in the West that Hausa-Fulani youths are restive because they are considered non-indigenous to Plateau State and are therefore treated as second class citizens. However, indigeneship is a national provision found in the 1999 Federal Constitution. The provision restricts certain official posts in every state to tribes that are indigenous to the state, and gives other social advantages to them also. The Hausa-Fulani in Plateau State are not the only settler tribe in Nigeria – long or short term – to be subject to this clause. Nevertheless, they are the sole tribe demanding – often with violence – a change in this provision that they appear to limit to Plateau State alone. A reciprocal lifting of this provision in states where the Hausa-Fulani are indigenous and in the majority – such as Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, Zamfara and so on – does not appear to be on the table. It is only in Plateau State, the majority non-Muslim one, where discrimination is said to be a major issue.

In reality, the reserved posts are not that many. Plateau State has Hausa-Fulani representatives in state and federal houses of assembly, and the current deputy speaker of the House of Representatives in Plateau State is Hausa-Fulani. They occupy around 28 political posts in Plateau State altogether. Attributing violence in Plateau State entirely to the indigeneship issue is therefore misleading. It subtly excuses violence on the part of the “disaffected” Hausa-Fulani youths, and also facilitates the process of decoupling violence in Plateau State

⁷ Muslim Mob Burns Down Christian Shops, 8 Churches in Nigeria, 23 February 2010, International Christian Concern, <http://tinyurl.com/icc-Feb-2010>.

⁸ Nigeria: ECWA laments Attack on its Churches, Seriki Adinoyi, *This Day*, 12 June 2010. <http://allafrica.com/stories/201006141198.html>.

⁹ Nigeria: Children amongst injured in village attack in Jos, CSW, 19 July 2010. <http://tinyurl.com/CSW-Jos-2010>.

from the violence occurring in most northern and central states where the Hausa-Fulani are indigenous, in the majority, and are the sole common denominator. It also distracts attention from the far more extreme and systematic marginalisation of non-Muslims in these states, where even indigenous non-Muslim tribes suffer comprehensive repression.

Why did they make this distinction between indigenes and settlers in the Federal Constitution?

The Indigene/Settler policy was put in place to protect the interest of Nigeria's smaller tribes in their local areas, who would otherwise be squeezed in terms of competition for jobs etc. by the three biggest tribes that dominate most aspects of Nigerian society, of which the Hausa Fulani are one. It may be a far from perfect system; however, if this provision is to be revised, it must be done on a national basis and at federal level, with changes applied to every state in the federation, including those of the core north.

I have been informed of examples where Muslims were persecuted in southern Nigeria. A mosque was destroyed by government functionaries, and Christian leaders boasted that they would never allow a mosque to be built in that area. Don't the Hausa-Fulani youth in Plateau have reasons to complain?

I am not personally familiar with the case you mention. However, while I do not doubt – and would deplore – the fact that such instances may occur sporadically in southern Nigeria, they are very far from being the norm. Comparing occasional discrimination experienced by Muslims in the south with the comprehensive suffering of non-Muslims in northern and central states is in no way comparing like with like. It is effectively minimising the systematic repression and marginalisation of non-Muslims in these areas, including indigenous ones. For example:

Are Muslim women and children abducted, forcibly converted and married off as second, third or fourth wives to Christians in Plateau State (or, indeed, in southern Nigeria), as occurs in remote areas of the Yauri Emirate of Kebbi, Katsina, Bauchi and elsewhere where the Hausa Fulani are indigenous and in the majority?

Also, are even Muslims that are indigenous to Plateau (such as Muslim members of the Berom, Anaguta and other local tribes)

deliberately deprived of educational opportunities or accused of blasphemy and hounded out of schools as occurs in Kano and elsewhere?

Has any Muslim teacher been lynched by their students and townfolk on a false charge and with no recourse to justice for their family, as occurred in the case of Christianah Oluwasesin in Gombe in 2007? This was the worst, but by no means the first attack on Christian students and teachers in that area.

Are Muslim villages in Plateau State deprived of solar electricity, wells and other social amenities, while nearby Christian ones have access to all of these at government expense, as in Kano, Katsina and elsewhere?

Are any small-scale Muslim subsistence farmers – or herders for that matter – who fall into arrears to Christian shop owners taken to courts of law that are not of their religion or choosing and forced to give up their means of livelihood and even in some instances hand over a child for conversion, as occurs in a remote part of Bauchi?

Do riots regularly break out in Plateau State or in the south over unproven rumours of blasphemy that result in the destruction of Muslim lives and property without compensation, and is this violence subsequently justified by the international media precisely on the grounds of these false or unproven allegations?

As I said earlier, the Fulani occupy around 28 political posts in Plateau State ranging from councillors to the deputy speaker of the House. This is the largest representation of all non-indigenous groups in the area. Off hand, I cannot similarly point to one non-indigenous non-Muslim in any of the other northern/central states elected to such political offices, let alone an indigenous one. Following the untimely demise of President Yar' Adua, the Muslim governor of Kaduna became vice president of Nigeria and was replaced by his deputy governor, who happens to be a Christian. Immediately, a state that had experienced the most appalling religious violence but was now seen as a model of reconciliation and peace building became tense again, with flurries of text messages calling on Muslims to rise up and resist this supposed Christian coup d'état.

So, what should be done about all this?

The Religious Liberty Partnership recently issued a comprehensive statement on this issue, and although each point is salient, I would like to highlight five in particular. Firstly, the Nigerian authorities must ensure an end to the impunity surrounding such violence by bringing perpetrators and planners to justice swiftly. This process would be greatly enhanced by the initiation of an internationally-facilitated and truly independent human rights investigation into violence and repression in northern Nigeria as a whole, and its principle sponsors. Thirdly, it is vital that the right to freedom of religion and belief is upheld in every state of the nation, with punitive action taken by individual state governments against violators, or alternatively by federal authorities, if a state shirks its responsibilities. This is a constitutional and international legal obligation. Fourthly, it is also vital, given continuing allegations of complicity and/or inaction on the part of the armed forces, that current security arrangements in Plateau State are reviewed, revamped, and transformed from being merely reactive to preventative and proactive. Finally, given the fact that news reports can often foment further violence, the international media needs to become more aware of its responsibilities in volatile circumstances, and must take care to verify with all parties and to report in an accurate and unbiased manner, issuing clear and timely retractions whenever necessary.

Thank you.