

Paris attacks parallel fears over growing jihadist threat in Africa



Internally displaced persons in Maiduguri, Borno State. October 2014 (PHOTO: World Watch Monitor).

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Several African leaders, concerned by the rise of Islamism in the continent, attended the Paris anti-terror march, on Sunday, January 11.

Among the 50 foreign leaders who marched there, African heads of state included those from Mali, Niger, Senegal, Benin, Togo, and Gabon. They all expressed their sympathy to France and the need for global action to tackle jihadist groups, increasingly active in sub-Saharan Africa.

In North-Eastern Nigeria, the bloodletting continued, as at least 23 people were killed at the weekend by three female suicide bombers, one thought to be 10 years old. The BBC reported witnesses who said that she appeared to be unaware she was carrying a bomb.

On January 3, militants launched an attack of extreme violence in Baga, Borno State, close to Lake Chad, which borders Chad. Local officials told the BBC that as many as 2000 people may have lost their lives. Almost two weeks after the attack, the Defence Ministry (known to under-estimate in the past) said those dead were no more than 150, including terrorists. However, almost the entire town had been torched and several churches burned down.

The militants have also raided 16 nearby villages and towns. According to the UN, over 11,000 people have fled to Chad since the attack on Baga.

West accused of ignoring Boko Haram threat

In reaction to these attacks, the Archbishop of Jos, and President of the Catholic Episcopal conference of Nigeria, accused the West of ignoring the threat of the militant Islamist group, Boko Haram.

Ignatius Kaigama said such ‘‘a monumental tragedy’’ required international support and unity of the type that had been shown after last week’s attacks in France.

“We need that spirit to be spread around,” he said. “Not just when it [an attack] happens in Europe, but when it happens in Nigeria, in Niger, in Cameroon’’.

[Several countries including the United States, Britain, France, Israel and China, have offered to support Nigeria to tackle the Boko Haram](#) insurgency following the kidnap of about 300 Chibok school girls in April. The disappearance of the girls has generated headlines around the world and fueled a social-media storm around the tag #bringbackourgirls. But for many observers, this wave of solidarity has been cooled by a lack of keenness from the Nigerian government to accept international offers.

So far the Nigerian army has shown its inability to tackle the Boko Haram insurgency, which has affected also its

neighbouring countries.

North-Eastern Cameroon has become a new battle zone. On Monday, militants attacked a military base at Kolofata, forcing residents to flee. This latest attack is a reminder of the daring raid carried out in July 2014, during which several people were killed. More than 20 other people, including the wife of the Cameroonian Deputy Prime Minister, were abducted before being released after weeks in captivity.

Contacted by telephone, a local church spokesman, who requested anonymity, told World Watch Monitor that almost all places of worship – about 26 churches – located near the border with Nigeria are closed. Thousands of residents, who fled the combat zones, were not able to collect their crops. Such a situation has raised the fear of famine in the region. Currently, relatives and churches who are trying to help the displaced are overwhelmed.

In Niger, local authorities are concerned by the advance of Boko Haram militants who have recently overrun the Borno town of Damassak, the closest to its border. The mayor of Diffa – a few kilometres from the border – has told media that he has seen the jihadists' black flag flying on the other side of the border. He has also expressed fear of possible attacks by militants in Niger itself. This fear is shared by the Archbishop of Niamey, who travelled to Paris on Sunday, along with the Niger President Mahamadou Issoufou.

“More and more young Nigeriens are being enlisted in the Boko Haram movement, especially in the region of Diffa” the Archbishop Mgr. Michel Cartatéguy, told the Catholic agency Fides.

“And these young people know Diffa better than members of Boko Haram and can show them where they have to carry out attacks”.

According to Niger authorities, more than 10 ,000 people have

fled to Niger since May 2013, when the Nigerian government declared a state of emergency in three north-eastern states following attacks from Boko Haram.

Caliphate

In recent weeks, the militants have hoisted their flag over dozens of towns and villages, and have declared the establishment of a Caliphate, believed to stretch over 50 000 square kms, an area larger than Switzerland.

The US State Department's spokeswoman said on Monday 12th that Nigeria's election next month is a factor behind the sharp increase in attacks by Boko Haram militants. She also expressed exasperation at her daily press briefing at the lack of interest in Nigeria compared to France's attacks.

Largely because of the insurgency, [Nigeria ranks No. 10 on the 2015 World Watch List](#), a ranking of the 50 countries where life for Christians is most difficult. The list was published last week by Open Doors International, a global charity that supports Christians who live under pressure because of their faith.

In northern Mali, the situation is also worrying as militants have intensified their attacks. On Jan 5, 8 Malian soldiers were killed in a raid carried out by suspected jihadists in Nampala barracks, near the Mauritania border. [The UN Peacekeepers in Mali have been frequently targeted by militants.](#)

When asked what was the best strategy to ensure safety from jihadists in Europe, the Niger President, Mahamadou Issoufou, said that an international military intervention is needed to try to restore stability in Libya.

“When they [NATO] intervened in Libya, no one consulted us, but now we pay the price for the situation, Issoufou told French media.

“Today everyone must listen to us, and what we must remember is that all our countries [in Africa] are only interim targets for these terrorists. The ultimate goal is the West, so the main enemy of these terrorists is the West.”

Since the fall of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, experts say the country has become a jihadist sanctuary, as rival groups battle for control.