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NIGERIA | Priests Killed During Morning Mass

Two Catholic priests were killed during morning Mass when Mbalom village in Gwer West Local Government Area (LGA) of Benue State, Nigeria, was attacked in the early hours of April 24 by members of the Fulani herder militia.

Parish Priest Father Joseph Gor and Father Felix Tyolaha died in the attack perpetrated by around 30 militia men on St. Ignatius' Catholic Church in the St. Ignatius Quasi Parish of Makurdi Diocese that also claimed the lives of 17 parishioners and left an unknown number of people injured. Many villagers fled into the bush as the militia men fired indiscriminately burning down around 73 homes and destroying food stores.

In a statement confirming the deaths, Rev. Father Moses Iorapuu, director of communications of Makurdi Diocese, said the local population was "asking why the International community has remained silent over the massacre of Benue citizens" and described the targeting of the priests as amounting to the "total destruction of everything we stand for and believe in, as a people."

Fulani militia-related violence has been escalating since 2015 with the central states of Nigeria, and particularly Adamawa, Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau, Taraba and southern Kaduna, experiencing cyclical violence.

In a message of condolence on Twitter on April 24, President Muhammadu Buhari referred to the perpetrators of the Mbalom attack as "gunmen" and assured "the people of Benue, and all Nigerians" that the government would "ensure that the assailants are apprehended and brought to justice for this vile and sacrilegious act."

Attacks on villages in Benue intensified following the implementation in November 2017 of the Anti-Open Grazing Law, which prohibits herders from grazing their cattle on land belonging to local farmers, restricting them to ranches. In January 2018, 73 villagers were killed in militia attacks on the Guma and Logo areas of the state.

In a Facebook post Jan. 3, Father Gor reportedly wrote that his community was “Living in fear. The fulanis are still around us here in mbalom. They refuse to go. They still go grazing around. No weapons to defend ourselves [sic].”

From April 1-7, 140 people died in armed violence, a third of them in militia-related attacks in Benue and Taraba states. During the week beginning April 8, at least 51 people were killed in militia attacks in Benue, Nasarawa and Taraba states. On April 18, the Defence Headquarters reportedly admitted that troops deployed in Benue, Taraba and other trouble spots had been withdrawn due to an acute shortage of financial and logistical resources.

An estimated 170,000 people in Benue state have been displaced internally as a result of herder militia violence. The Catholic Diocese of Makurdi, which is one of the largest dioceses in Nigeria, has been active in providing humanitarian relief and education to internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The attack on Mbalom came days after the killings of 10 people by militia men in Guma LGA. It also followed the destruction of numerous homes and properties in Naka town, the headquarters of Gwer West LGA, reportedly by military personnel angered at discovering a fellow soldier buried in a shallow grave. It also came a week after the acting governor of Benue state, Mr. Benson Abounu, had warned of impending attacks on five communities.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, “This cowardly attack on people who had merely gathered to worship constitutes a gross violation of the right to freedom of religion or belief. We extend our heartfelt condolences to the families, friends, parishioners and colleagues of Fathers Gor and Tyolaha, and all those who were killed. We urge President Buhari to make good on his assurances that the perpetrators of these brutal murders will be apprehended, and to ensure that culprits responsible for earlier massacres are also brought to justice. We also urge the international community to ensure that the Nigerian government addresses this violence effectively. It is unacceptable that after years of bloodletting, no perpetrators have been brought to justice and the militia is still able to wander from state to state, killing at will. The death toll is staggering and the loss of life will not be stemmed until a holistic, proactive security arrangement, that can protect civilians in villages like Mbalom, is formulated, resourced and implemented.”