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NIGERIA | Herder Militia Responsible for 106 Attacks

Fulani herder militia perpetrated at least 106 attacks on communities in central Nigeria in the first quarter of 2018, claiming 1,061 lives, according to research by CSW. An additional 11 attacks on communities recorded in the south of the country claimed 21 more lives.

The figures were compiled by CSW UK and Nigeria using organizational records, a timeline issued by the Office of the President of the Nigerian Senate, #MiddlebeltMassacres in Twitter, Nigerian news sources and the Council of Foreign Relations' Nigeria Security Tracker.

CSW also documented seven instances of violence targeting Fulani herders or communities within the four-month timeframe, in which 61 people lost their lives. Two of them occurred in the south of the country.

There has been a long history of disputes between nomadic herders and farming communities across the Sahel, which are often referred to as "farmer-herder clashes." However, attacks by herder militia are currently occurring with such frequency, organization and asymmetry that the characterization as "clashes" no longer suffices.

Armed with sophisticated weaponry, including AK-47s and on at least one occasion, rocket launchers, the herder militia is believed to have killed more men, women and children in 2015, 2016 and 2017 than Boko Haram, in what local observers increasingly describe as a campaign of ethno-religious cleansing.

In an illustration of how closely this violence correlates with religion, the local chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) recently revealed that herders have destroyed over 500 churches in Benue state alone since 2011.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW has catalogued every reported attack, amalgamating existing lists and omitting incidents not associated with the herder militia. While it may not be definitive, the list attempts to provide as comprehensive a record as possible of known attacks and of the death toll in the Middle Belt during the first quarter of this year, in order to underline the critical need for urgent, effective intervention."

The situation has been exacerbated by an inadequate government response to this violence, which in turn has fostered impunity. Beyond intermittent verbal condemnations, definitive action has not been taken to end it. Moreover, no perpetrator has been brought to justice, although in early June, police in Benue reported that 61 people allegedly associated with the killings are to face trial.

CSW has so far documented over 400 deaths in 46 attacks during the second quarter of 2018. In one of the most recent, at least 200 people reportedly died in coordinated attacks on around 50 communities in Barkin Ladi Local Government Area (LGA), Plateau state, which began June 22 and lasted until June 24. The majority of victims were women and children, and 120 were killed as they returned from the funeral of an elderly member of the Church of Christ In Nations (COCIN).

Thomas said, “The number of attacks and casualties is staggering, and illustrates the appallingly high price communities in central Nigeria are paying for the absence of an effective official response to a force that not only constitutes a threat to national security, but also to national unity. We urge the government to guarantee the safety, protection and right to life of all Nigerians, regardless of creed or ethnicity, and to formulate, as a matter of urgency, a comprehensive and holistic security strategy that adequately resources the security forces to address this and other sources of violence.”