

Al-Shabab militants target Christian teachers in northern Kenya

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WAJIR, Kenya (RNS)—After the militant group al-Shabab killed three of his colleagues in a recent attack on Christian schoolteachers here, Jared Nyanhong'i packed his few belongings and boarded a bus to Kenya's capital, Nairobi.

"These people call us black Satan, devil and kafir," said Nyanhong'i, 40, a father of three. "The life of teachers is very important. We love teaching, and we can teach in all parts of the country—but only when our lives are not threatened."

Nyanhong'i is one of more than 1,100 Christian teachers who have fled since al-Shabab began coming across the border into northern Kenya from Somalia in 2017, mostly targeting non-Muslim teachers. While about 85 percent of Kenya is Christian, the country's north is occupied predominantly by Muslim ethnic Somalis.

In October, the militants hurled an improvised explosive device into one of the two apartment blocks housing Christian teachers at the Arabia Boys Secondary School, killing two.

Now, nonlocal teachers in the region want to be transferred to safer areas for security reasons.

"I'm very lucky to be alive," said Elijah Nderitu, who teaches English and literature at the school. "I had a chilling encounter with the militants but I hid under my bed. They wanted to kill all of us who are nonlocal teachers. I

will never teach in this region and I want to be transferred to safer areas.”

The latest attacks represent a return of al-Shabab, which has singled out and killed non-Muslim teachers and students in the past. In April 2015, al-Shabab killed more than 148 Christian students from Garissa University, about 200 miles south of Wajir.

The attacks have come in retaliation against the country’s sending its troops to Somalia to fight the extremist group in 2011.

Non-Muslim teachers suffer discrimination

The Kenya National Union of Teachers has said nonlocal teachers, who make up as many as 60 percent of the teachers in the area, have long suffered discrimination by locals, who, officials said, often aid the militants in targeting Christians.

“We have heard cases of locals pretending to be al-Shabab or conspiring with the same group to target nonlocal teachers,” Wilson Sossion, secretary general of the union, said last year. “Students have attacked teachers through stoning, clobbering and issuing verbal attacks.”

Cyntia Chepkemoi, a teacher, said she was forced to adopt customary Muslim dress and was told Sharia law prohibited her from correcting her male students in class.

“It’s difficult to teach them,” she said. “You are forced to wear hijabs before you can go to class. Whatever a male student says or does, it’s right and you can’t afford to correct him. They will beat you and call you all bad names.”

Teachers from other parts of Kenya are commonly sent to the north to

make up for shortages. For decades, many local teaching candidates have not performed well enough on national qualifying exams to be trained as teachers.

Religious leaders have urged Kenyans not to be divided by the militants' provocations.

Bishop Philip Anyolo, chairman of the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the church will continue to open more Catholic-sponsored and private schools in the volatile region to ensure all children have equal access to education.

"We have mutual relationships with Muslims and we understand one another," Anyolo said in an interview. "These are criminals who are hiding behind religion and we know. I don't think there is any religion that supports the killing of innocent people."

Nyanchong'i, a teacher, disagreed.

"They hate nonlocal teachers, and that's the reason we are leaving the region," he said. "You can only become their friends if you accept to convert and be a Muslim."