

Nigerian Christians fear violence as Christmas approaches

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PLATEAU, Nigeria (BP)—Christians in Nigeria plan to celebrate Christmas amid fear of a repeat of violence that claimed at least 160 lives in Nigeria's Middle Belt at Christmastime in 2023 and dozens in northern Nigeria during the holidays in 2022, international religious liberty advocates reported.



Victims of the gunmen attack in north central Nigeria, receive treatment at Jos University Teaching hospital in Jos Nigeria on Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023. Musa Ashoms, commissioner of information and communication for Plateau State, reported 195 deaths due to the attacks. (AP Photo/Sunday Alamba)

After unsubstantiated warnings were dismissed and led to bloodshed last year, residents are alarmed by warnings in Plateau and Benue states, Open Doors said Dec. 16.

“This year again, there are stories going around that there will be a repeat of last year,” Open Doors quoted a source in Plateau State, but did not give a name. “People are scared. What happened to Christians was painful. It caused a lot of heartbreak and distrust in our communities.”

Samuel, a Christian from the northern state of Kaduna that borders the Middle Belt, told International Christian Concern he suspects many churches will use security forces during Christmas services. Dozens of Christians were murdered in his hometown at Christmas of 2022.

“Threats are reported to the authorities, but some people don’t trust the security agencies and feel the need to defend themselves instead,” ICC quoted Samuel, using an alias to protect the identity of the Christian enrolled in college in the United Kingdom.

“Some security agents are corrupt and either allow the attacks to happen or even help the attackers. On top of that, many Christians in the North believe that some politicians sponsor these attacks for religious or political reasons.”



Victims of a gunmen attack pray for peace at the internal displaced

camp in Bokkos, north central Nigeria, Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023. Victims of a gunmen attack react at the internal displaced camp upon the arrival of Nigeria Vice President Kashim Shettima, in Bokkos, north central Nigeria, on Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023. Musa Ashoms, commissioner of information and communication for Plateau State, reported 195 deaths due to the attacks. (AP Photo/Sunday Alamba)

In 2023, suspected Fulani militants attacked 26 Christian villages in Plateau state Dec. 23-25, killing at least 160 in a coordinated, military-style assault, it was widely reported, lamented and decried.

Some reports, including one from the Catholic News Agency, put the death toll at 198, based on information from local news sources and human rights activists. No group claimed responsibility for the attack.

At least 5,000 Christians were displaced, eight churches were burned and two clerics were among those killed, including a Baptist pastor and nine members of his family, *Christianity Today* reported.

Christmas has long been dangerous for Christians in Nigeria, despite their sizable share of the population at 46 percent.

On Christmas Day in 2012, Boko Haram bombed churches in five cities in northern Nigeria, killing dozens and injuring others. Boko Haram led the way in trying to establish a caliphate across northern Nigeria, progressing for more than a decade before being pushed back during the presidency of Muhammadu Buhari in 2015.

The group remains active in the north with jihadist offshoots, while militant Fulani whom others identified as bandits have surged in the Middle Belt, according to religious liberty advocates.

Nigeria remains the deadliest country for Christians, with more than 50,000 killed between 2009 and 2023. Of the 4,998 Christians killed for their faith in 2023, more than 80 percent of them were in Nigeria, Open Doors reported in its 2024 World Watch List of the 50 most dangerous places for Christians.

Surviving Christians remain resilient and hopeful despite the widespread death and displacement, Open Doors reported, telling of a congregation that returned to the ruins of its bombed church building to worship at Thanksgiving.

In Mangu, the capital city of Nigeria's Plateau State, 280 worshipers gathered at what remains of their church to worship after a September 2023 attack blamed on Fulani militants killed and displaced many in the community, Open Doors said.

"Satan, you can't make me compromise my faith," Open Doors said the worshipers sang in their local Mwaghavul dialect. "One day God will deliver us as he did the Israelites."

Preaching from John 16:33, the pastor encouraged congregations to "be hopeful, courageous and resilient," Open Doors said, reminding them, "In this world, they will keep facing persecution and tribulation, but be of good cheer, God has overcome the world."