

Religious terrorism in Burkina Faso claims 160 lives

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YAGHA, Burkina Faso (BP)—Jihadists are blamed for killing 160 people in Burkina Faso in a prolonged weekend attack among the latest in violent religious persecution in Africa's Sahel region.

Government and nongovernmental leaders there blame the Islamic State regional affiliate, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, for the attack, although no one has claimed responsibility. The attack is the deadliest in Burkina Faso's history and spurred calls for increased international counterterrorism efforts in West Africa.

'Inflamed religious tensions'

Such attacks in the predominantly Muslim Sahel region, on the southern shore of the Sahara, are religiously motivated and target both Christians and moderate Muslims, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

"As violent Islamist groups gain ground in central Sahel, they are committing religious freedom violations in their areas of operation," the commission said in a May factsheet. "Across parts of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, ISGS and Katiba Macina have imposed strict interpretations of Sharia law, restricted religious practice and executed individuals because of their beliefs.

"These trends have inflamed religious tensions and increased persecution across West Africa," the commission stated "a religiously diverse region home both to an inspiring history of interfaith tolerance and also pockets of

sectarian violence and poor religious freedom conditions.”

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom identified Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and Katiba Macina among several terrorist groups growing in the region.

Civilians shot, homes burned

In the weekend attack on remote Solhan village in Yagha province in northern Burkina Faso, jihadists shot civilians, torched homes and a market, and threw explosives into goldmining holes where some civilians hid during the onslaught.

Solhan officials recovered 160 bodies on June 6 in three mass graves that held victims of the attack, Agence France-Presse reported. The death toll previously was reported as 132 and might yet rise, according to reports.

Amed, a goldminer who managed to survive in a mining hole, told the Wall Street Journal he was awakened by the sounds of AK-47-style rifles early June 5.

“I found the bodies of four of my friends and we buried them in a mass grave,” the newspaper quoted Amed. “When our army says it’s safe, I don’t know what they mean.”

Burkina Faso President Roch Kabore announced a three-day national mourning period ending June 8.

The Solhan deaths are in addition to 14 people killed June 4 in an attack on Tadaryat village about 100 miles north of Solhan, BBC reported. In May, 30 people were killed in an attack in east Burkina Faso.

‘Loosely affiliated militant Islamist groups’

Nearly a third of Burkina Faso identify as Christian, comprising the largest group of Christians in any of the targeted Sahel nations, including Mali and Niger, which are 94 percent and 99 percent Muslim, respectively. Most are Sunni.

Katiba Macina, founded in 2015 by a Fulani Muslim, has aligned with other Salafi jihadists in central Mali to establish Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, which the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom describes as a “coalition of loosely affiliated militant Islamist groups.” The group is “almost exclusively responsible” for the sharp rise in attacks in fatalities in the Sahel annually since 2016, the commission said.

Terrorists operating in the region also fight against one another based on religious beliefs.

“ISGS violence against members of rival jihadist groups in the region may also amount to targeting individuals based on their beliefs,” the commission wrote in its factsheet. “Following an extended period when ISGS and al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the region tolerated each other’s presence, relations between these groups deteriorated in 2020.”

The latest killings in Burkina Faso add to the estimated 8,000 such killings in the Sahel in 2020, according to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies. More than 1.7 million people have been displaced in the region, including 170,000 refugees and 1.5 million internally displaced persons, according to Africa Center statistics.

Regional counterterrorism initiatives include the G5 Sahel Joint Force, an ad hoc military intelligence coalition comprising Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Mauritania and Chad.

The U.S. State Department condemned the attack, having previously designated the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin as entities of particular concern for severe religious freedom violations in areas under the entities' control.