

‘YOUR LAND OR YOUR BLOOD’

The escalating persecution and displacement of
Christians in northern and central Nigeria



St. Peter's Anglican Church in Zangam was attacked by Fulani one month ago

A visit report by Baroness (Caroline) Cox and Revd David Thomas



Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust
November 2019

"We wanted to run but dad was fragile and very old, so I carried him to his bed. They entered our hut and shot him. They knew I was hiding under his bed."

Naomi, Karamai, Kaduna State

"I saw my brother-in-law's body on the ground, hacked to pieces by a machete. Our home was destroyed. The hospital was burnt. They tried to burn the roof of the church by piling up the chairs, like a bonfire."

Antonia, Karamai

"Every day we carry new corpses to the cemetery. They kill farmers. They destroy our homes and churches. They kidnap and rape women."

Pastor, Maiduguri in Borno

"We could see bullets whizzing. Everything was destroyed. In our whole village, only two of the homes were not burnt. Almost 50 people were killed."

Ta'aziya, Karamai

"They attacked me with a machete twice, once to the neck and once to my hand. I lost consciousness. When I woke up, I saw my daughter on ground – she was dead – with my chopped finger in her mouth."

Veronica, Dogon Noma

"Only me and my husband remain. Our home is destroyed. Nothing survived. We have to beg for food."

Asabe, Karamai

"We are still not safe in our homes. I am raising an alarm – if the government will listen. Lord in your mercy."

Archbishop Ben Kwashi, Jos

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Background

Islamist Fulani militia continue to engage in an aggressive and strategic land-grabbing policy in Plateau, Benue, Taraba, southern Kaduna and parts of Bauchi state. They attack rural villages, force villagers off their lands and settle in their place – a strategy that is epitomised by the phrase: ‘your land or your blood’.¹

The underlying drivers of conflict are complex. Yet targeted violence against predominantly Christian communities suggests that religion and ideology play a key part.²

- Before most of the attacks, the Fulani send a ‘warning signal’ via a note or a phone call (in line with the rules of engagement in *jihad*) to tell villagers that an attack is imminent.
- Christian pastors and community heads are specifically targeted.
- Hundreds of churches have been destroyed.
- During many of the attacks, the Fulani are reported by survivors to have shouted ‘Allahu Akbar’, ‘destroy the infidels’ and ‘wipe out the infidels’.

The exact death toll for 2019 is unknown. Preliminary data suggests that over 1,000 Christians have been killed since January, in addition to the estimated 6,000+ deaths since 2015.³

The attacks have, on occasion, led to retaliatory violence, as communities conclude that they can no longer rely on the Government for protection or justice. However, we have seen no evidence of comparability of scale or equivalence of atrocities.

¹ This statement is quoted by local people and is reportedly reinforced by a quotation from the Spokesman and Director of Media for the President: ‘Is it not better to give up your land and be alive?’

² As evidenced in the Bishop of Truro’s Independent Review for the UK Foreign Secretary of Foreign and Commonwealth Office Support for Persecuted Christians, 2019, page 32

³ There were five major attacks in Kaduna State between January and November 2019, resulting in an estimated 500 deaths. There were at least another five attacks in Bassa and Riyom Local Councils, as well as many attacks in Taraba State. Boko Haram remain in power around the Chad border region, including parts of Borno State.

Who are the Fulani?

The Fulani are an ethnic group of about 20 million people across 20 west and central African countries. Since time immemorial, they have driven their herds of cattle across fertile lands, including through other people's farms. This has caused tensions and some violence, but traditionally, they have moved on.

In the last four to five years, growing numbers of Fulani have adopted a new land-grabbing policy – motivated by an extremist belief system and equipped with sophisticated weaponry – which has led to thousands of people massacred and to the permanent displacement of vulnerable rural communities.

While tensions between sedentary farmers and nomadic herders have existed for centuries, recent attacks suggest a worrying trend: the Fulani's military capability and ideological fervour are increasing.



Paying respect to seven victims at their mass grave in Zangam village, Kafanchan Diocese.

The Global Terrorism Index in 2016 and 2017 named Fulani militia as the fourth deadliest terrorist group in the world, with only Boko Haram, ISIS and al-Shabab being accounted deadlier.

Survivor testimonies

We met representatives of five villages that suffered attacks by Fulani militia, where an estimated 12,000 people have been forced to flee. In two of the villages, a total of 116 people were killed.

Although it was only possible to meet a very limited number of people and therefore obtain limited evidence, the consistency of the information and the experiences of those whom we met is inherently disturbing and builds on the evidence from our previous visits.



Fulani militia cut off Veronica's finger and put it into her daughter's mouth and killed her.

Veronica John, aged 35, from Dogon Noma

Veronica's home was attacked by Fulani militia. Only she and three others survived. She told us that 13 of her friends and family were killed.

"It was early on a Monday morning when Fulani came. I heard commotion outside, so I woke up the children and put the baby on my back. We tried to run. But we were surrounded. It was an ambush. They shot me. I raised my arm, pleading for mercy. My six-year-old daughter did the same. But the man behind her struck her with a machete and pulled her to ground. Another man attacked

me with a machete twice, once to the neck and once to my hand. I was so confused. I lost consciousness.

“When I woke up, I saw my daughter on ground – she was dead – with my chopped finger in her mouth. My brother’s ten-year-old daughter was also dead. I can’t move this hand with the missing finger. I don’t have feelings in this hand. My brother came with others looking for any survivors and he found me. He took me to the village but there was no medical help so he took me to Kachia, but on the way they stopped at Crossing where someone with medical experience took me in for sutures. Two days later I was taken to Jos.”



Caroline Cox with Veronica, who was attacked by Fulani militia.

Antonia Aje, aged 38, from Karamai

“I was living in fear. My friends advised me not to sleep at home, so I slept in the bush. I heard gunshots and the attack started. My seven-year-old was too heavy to carry. We ran, with bullets all around. We hid in the bushes until the gunshots subsided. When we returned, I saw my brother-in-law’s body on the ground,

hacked to pieces by a machete. My mother-in-law is so traumatised that she cannot live alone. There is no professional support available so it is down to me to help her. Our home is destroyed. The hospital was burnt. They tried to burn the roof of the church by piling up the chairs, like a bonfire. Life is frightening. We sometimes receive messages of a renewed attack. So we run to hide. We have no means of defence. We don't have weapons to defend ourselves. There is no kind of security or vigilante support."

As Abd Zakkaa, aged 45, from Karamai

"At first, the Fulani came to rustle. But then the kidnappings began. My family slept in the bushes to avoid the attacks, which we feared could happen at any moment. When the attack finally came, I was in Church. I heard screaming and came outside to gunshots. The Fulani were dressed in black. They called us to go towards them. I survived but my mother-in-law and sister-in-law were killed with guns and machetes. I lost my mind. I am so insecure and full of fear that I have sent four of my children to live with relatives in Abuja and one of my children with relatives elsewhere. Only me and my husband remain. Our home is destroyed. Nothing survived. We have to beg for food. We only survive thanks to other people's donations."



Naomi with her left arm amputated by Fulani and paralysed fingers on her broken right arm.

Naomi Joseph, aged 54, from Karamai

"I was in Karamai to prepare a funeral. At about 6pm, my father and I heard warnings that a Fulani attack was imminent. We wanted to run but dad was fragile and very old, so I carried him to his bed. They entered our hut and shot my father. They knew I was hiding under his bed. I could hear them debating whether to shoot me with a gun or hack me with a machete.

"I reached out with my left arm to stop them but they hacked me, slicing my fingers, which fell on my face. Then they cut off the wrist on my right arm. I fell backwards and saw a third blow coming to my face. So I raised my right arm again. The machete blow cut through my arm and chin. After this, they stole money from my room and started setting other rooms alight. Then they walked out. I crawled from the burning building and crept into my brother's house. I was scared that a chicken would run out of the room and I would be found."

Ta'aziya Maikarfi, aged 45, from Karamai

"We were not too frightened initially because the Fulani were cattle rustling amongst themselves. Some of the youth went to a nearby village to play football. On their way home, the Fulani attacked and shot four boys including my brother-in-law's son. About four years' ago, they kidnapped people requiring ransom. Then in February 2019, they attacked again. We were in church and someone warned us to run.

"We could see bullets whizzing. I ran home and, thankfully, my children had already fled. Everything was destroyed. In our whole village, only two of the homes were not burnt. Almost 50 people were killed. We are grateful to Christians and the Church for their prayers and support. Our major concern now is to return to villages because we have no other heritage. My husband was a teacher and was sacked so there is nothing for him to do. I would like to study at Polytechnic for computer science but has no money for fees. We rely on donations. It is so frustrating because aid doesn't reach us. It doesn't reach villages. It stops at townships and with officials."

Extracts from other testimonies:

"The attacks started with cattle rustling but quickly developed to kidnappings and killings. Even when we manage to pay the full ransom, there is no guarantee that our neighbour will survive."

"Our churches were burnt. They set fire to chairs, musical instruments and bibles."

"We see the Fulani militia when we go farming. They carry machetes and guns."

"We managed to escape but only with the clothes we were wearing. We make do with what we have. Our homes were destroyed and we are now making bricks to re-build. Many people are wounded. We have six amputees here."

"In Karamai village on 20 February, 11 people were killed. At 6am we heard shouts of Allah Akbar. They carried petrol bombs. Those with guns and machetes killed people."

"There were more attacks on 10 March (26 killed) and 11 March. We alerted the authorities but they arrived too late. We see helicopters in the sky, guiding the attacks to safe destinations: the helicopter slants in the best direction and Fulani follow."

Visit to Zangam village in Kafanchan Diocese, which was attacked by Fulani militia one month ago. We spoke to survivors Ezekiel Thomas, Jonathan Bitrus, Monday Daniel, Nufi Thaddeus and Habila Yakubu.



Bishop Jacob at St Peter's Anglican Church in Zangam destroyed last month.

“They attacked on Monday but didn’t get anyone, so they returned again on Thursday afternoon, at 4pm, killing seven people and burning shops, homes and three churches, including the Anglican ECWA, Roman Catholic and Anglican Church St. Peter.

“Most of our village fled. Those who remain have no security and have nowhere else to go. One person was injured. 14 houses were burnt. The church was destroyed. They stole musical instruments and other useful items, then collected chairs, bibles and other items not wanted, setting them alight and burning the Church.”



Burnt remnants of musical equipment at St Peter’s Anglican Church in Zangam.

The Rt. Revd. Bishop Idris Zubairu, Bishop of Bari, told us about the security situation in Bauchi.

“There are five groups working together against Christians: Boko Haram, which has its headquarters in the northeast and its Treasury in Bauchi; the Muslim Brotherhood are represented in each State; the Maitasine (also known as Yan Tatsine) have been in existence since the 1980s, mostly in northern Nigeria; there is also the Kala Kato and the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (sometimes called MACBAN), who support the Fulani. Herdsmen attack northern and central Nigeria with kidnappings or abductions for ransom.

“The UK must monitor very closely the activities and security strategies of the Nigerian Government. It should keep a close eye on infrastructural developments, such as the rebuilding of the northeast, and whether state finances are used to buy weapons or to build facilities for terrorist groups. Any money given should involve local communities and local leaders – clergy, imams, surveyors – they should be directly involved in labour, given an income, and helped to track use of spending.

“The Fulani look for money and undertake kidnappings for ransom. But thanks to the local security and military presence, we have been able to stifle their efforts. In March, 30 militants in the nearby town were forced away. Three of them were arrested. In some places more Muslims are killed than Christians by Boko Haram and Fulani.”

Meeting with pastors and leaders from the North Maiduguri, Borno

“Boko Haram might launch an attack at any time. Yesterday evening in Maiduguri, they came with sophisticated weapons. And this morning at 4am, they arrived with bombs. They focus their attacks on Christians. It is part of their Islamist agenda to eliminate us. They target Christian soldiers – every day we carry new corpses to the cemetery. They kill farmers. They destroy our homes and churches. They kidnap and rape women. Some women are forced to marry Muslims. Boko Haram also attack Government properties and the police. No one can go beyond 5 km from town.”



Church and community representatives from Maiduguri and other places in Borno State.

“When we speak up, we are accused by the media of Hate Speech. But we are simply stating the facts. Persecution is real here. We are targeted because of our faith. NGOs come from abroad to help Christians but the Government prevents any help from reaching us. Christians in northern Borno State are totally unhelped. We need your prayers to rescue us from this terrible situation.”

Humanitarian aid

Our small NGO, the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART), tries to provide both advocacy and aid for the communities that are served and supported by our HART partners.

In Nigeria, we are privileged to support the Mai Adiko Reconciliation Project and the Christian Institute in Jos, and Schools and a Clinic in Bari, Kano State and Ningi School in Bauchi State.

Mai Adiko Reconciliation Project, coordinated by the Revd. Canon Hassan John

This programme was established to build friendships between Muslims and Christians in Rayfield, Jos.

Christian and Muslim women come together to share skills in various programmes, including tailoring, catering, management and beautiful bead work. In so doing, they develop friendships, which help to heal fear and distrust between communities which have suffered intercommunal violence. Their joy in this programme is visible and confirmed by the constant growth of the programme. At the time of writing, nearly 200 women are involved.

Similar, appropriately-adapted programmes are established for young men and women to develop activities and friendships. They choose to develop a different approach with more autonomy in the programmes.

HART is very grateful to the Jerusalem Foundation for their support for this successful and important reconciliation programme with a grant of £3,000; also to individual donors.



The Mai Adiko Reconciliation Project, initiated by the Anglican Diocese of Jos, aims to build peace by bringing together members of the Christian and Muslim communities for a broad range of activities, including skills-sharing, training, sporting competitions and the generation of small businesses.

Ningi Interfaith School, Bauchi State

HART has been privileged to support the development of this school, established to promote good relationships between Muslim and Christian pupils.

HART previously funded a bore hole to provide easily accessible water for the school.

Now, we are grateful to Guernsey Overseas Aid & Development (OADC) for financial help to build a wall for security and to contribute to the building of a hall to be used for many purposes, including examinations, lessons, parents' evenings, community meetings for peace, and sporting activities.

Muslims and Christians work happily together in all three categories of trustees, staff and pupils; although a Christian foundation by the Bauchi diocese twenty years ago, the school has developed in the last three years to the stage of a majority of children being Muslim.

The Rt. Revd. Bishop Idris Zubairu, Bishop of Bari, Kano State

"The local school is a bridge for peace and unity. Christian and Muslims work alongside each other. Staff and students say they prefer the education system because they love the moral and academic discipline. Muslim girls can wear the hijab to give them acceptance. We see that it is possible to work together happily.

"God is doing great things here. We now have 15 teachers and the school is full (about 150 girls and 100 boys). We had four degree graduates recently in biology, chemistry, maths and agriculture. In the next three months, thanks to the generosity of the OADC through HART, we hope to complete the work of expanding the school to a total of 16 classrooms, four offices, a staff room, the Head Teacher's office, a laboratory and a library. We already have over 100 textbooks from pre-nursery to secondary school. But we hope to have 300 textbooks by Easter, to make full use of the library.

"The 'Guernsey' funds will also soon assist us to open hostels for 50 girls and 50 boys, with three toilets and one shower in each hostel.

"Thanks to HART donations we have been able to pay for clinic workers (£800) and for medicine (£800). Health inspectors from Ministry of Health came last year and once more gave their approval for our services. We have two visiting nurses (one qualified in midwifery), one lab technician, an administrator, and a visiting doctor every Thursday from Ahmadu Bello University Teaching Hospital in Zaria. We are also able to provide maternity care and some surgery as needed, such as appendectomy, chronic typhoid, fibroids, hernia or fluid drainage."

Emergency Relief for IDPs in Plateau State

HART is also profoundly grateful to Guernsey OADC for responding generously to emergency needs for IDPs with £45,000 in Jos County. People who had been driven off their lands by Fulani militia were living in dire and desperate conditions with no help from other international aid organisations. Most of the funding was used to buy emergency food; the remainder used to improve living conditions, assist the reintroduction of education for the children cruelly deprived of it when their communities were driven off their land, and improving healthcare. The nearest health facilities to these communities were in Jos, too far to travel to have much hope of saving lives, and reducing trauma, of those injured in attacks.

A much nearer non-functioning clinic has now been restored, equipped and provided with staff.

Zambiri School and Clinic



(Left) Gloria Kwashi at the entrance to the Clinic; (Right) a very competent Clinic nurse.

The school for orphaned and abandoned children and children is in great need of further support. Dr. Gloria Kwashi, the wife of Archbishop Benjamin Kwashi, established this school for 400 children ranging from very young to senior school ages. She also rises early in the morning at about 4am to cook a huge quantity of food for them – for some, it is the only meal of the day.

Again, HART is deeply grateful Guernsey OADC for providing some of the funding for the restoration and extension of a clinic to serve the needs of the children as well as the local community.

The Christian Institute, Jos

In previous years, HART has been privileged to provide some support for the Institute, which provides high-quality vocational training for students entering the ministry and for Community Health Workers. There has been useful complementarity of training of staff with the work of HART-supported projects, such as Institute-trained Health Workers serving in the projects at Bari in Kano State.

We have applications currently under consideration for further financial support. HART is supplying extra books and teaching aids for the Community Health course.



David Thomas and Caroline Cox with staff and students at the Christian Institute.

Recommendations and conclusions

From our HART partners in Plateau, Bauchi and Kano States to the Nigerian and UK Governments, international aid organisations and all who care about the tragic situation in Nigeria.

- **Religious persecution:** While the underlying causes of violence are complex, the asymmetry and escalation of attacks by well-armed Fulani militia upon predominately Christian communities is stark and must be acknowledged. It is too simplistic to label these atrocities as driven by desertification, climate change or competition for resources. Protracted attempts to address these (albeit important) long-term factors will not stop the current massive rate of killings.
- **International recognition:** The situation fulfils the criteria of genocide and should be recognised as such, with the responsibility of the international community to respond accordingly. For countries such as the UK merely to “emphasise the importance of mediation and inter-faith dialogue” ignores the seriousness of the crisis and the scale of persecution.⁴

⁴ Letter from Andrew Stephenson MP, UK Minister for Africa, 25 August 2019, following a letter to Dominic Raab MP, UK Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, 25 July 2019, from Baroness Cox, Lord Alton, Lord Chidzey, Lord Carey and Jeremy Lefroy MP.

- **Religious freedom:** The provision for freedom of worship and association is enshrined in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. However, the Nigerian Government has been accused of only occasionally investigating or prosecuting those responsible for abusing religious freedom.
- **Immediate engagement:** The Nigerian administration has taken steps to counter the Boko Haram insurgency in urban areas. However, it has not demonstrated the same commitment to tackle the escalating violence perpetrated by Fulani militia against rural farming communities. It is widely reported that youths in Jos have taken matters into their own hands by going on violent reprisals against Muslims who they believe are backed by the Government. Such reprisals cannot be condoned. Yet they must be seen in the context of an urgent need for the authorities to enforce the rule of law to protect all its citizens, including minorities.
- **Accountability:** Given the Nigerian Government's apparent complicity in the persecution of Christians, international aid should be curtailed until Abuja takes seriously its duties to protect and to provide for its own citizens of any belief who are being subjected to such horrendous suffering.
- **Reconstruction and involvement of local communities:** The coordination of humanitarian assistance must involve local communities and local leaders, including clergy, imams, surveyors and medical professionals, to ensure funding is not diverted away from those suffering the loss of family members and the destruction of their homes and crops.
- **Resources:** Many survivors now live in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, with an estimated 20,000 IDPs in Plateau, Benue and Taraba States. They are restricted in their opportunities to develop sustainable livelihoods and are at risk of severe abuse and exploitation, with very little or grossly inadequate state intervention.⁵ There is no guarantee that resources for humanitarian aid will reach those most in need, meaning the Church is overstretched trying to provide assistance.

⁵ An IDP camp we visited last year received an eviction notice by a mining corporation, which owns the land. The Nigerian Government sent IDPs back to their home communities but provided no assistance with reconstruction, house provision, land, animals or security.

Acknowledgements

We are deeply grateful to all who met us and shared information and experiences. We are particularly grateful to those who, despite the pain, told us their personal stories of horrendous suffering, with great courage.

We wish to thank all who arranged our complex programme and all who offered us traditional generous Nigerian hospitality. We also wish to thank the Deputy High Commissioner for the opportunity to meet her and her colleagues in Abuja.

Appendix: Message to Churches from the Rt. Revd. Bishop Idris Zubairu, Bishop of Bari, Kano State

“The Church should intensify prayer. Part of the battle against persecution is won on our knees. That is sometimes the only way we can fight the enemy.

“Leah Sharibu [a Christian school girl who was kidnapped by Boko Haram] worked as a missionary. When terrorists were wounded, she would pray for them. Eleven of her captors have converted to Christianity. They now risk being killed and tortured for apostacy but, so far, they have not rescinded. We have not heard from Leah for a long time. Friends met her in June but we could not find her in August. The President’s office said in September that she was alive. But we haven’t been able to verify this.

“The Church should promote interfaith dialogue and trauma healing. Two NGOs – the African Service and Stefanos Foundation – coordinate important work on trauma healing. Cardinal John Aikon and the Peace Foundation are also doing excellent work to reconcile Muslim and Christian women and youths.”