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NIGERIA Six-year-old child among victims of weekend violence in Jos

At least 16 students were injured and an unknown number of people killed over the weekend in Nigeria's Plateau State in circumstances that have once again called into question the role of the security forces. The casualties include a six-year-old child, who died when a soldier deliberately opened fire on civilians.

The weekend of violence began on the evening of Friday, January 28, when members of a Muslim funeral procession drove through Jos University's Student Village near Farin Gada, taunted occupants, and stabbed a male and female student in the presence of soldiers stationed nearby.

When angry students demanded to know why the soldiers had failed to prevent the stabbings, one of the soldiers drew a line on the ground, threatening to shoot any student who crossed it. As Professor Rodgak Gofwen, Dean of Students Affairs, arrived at the scene to calm the students, a soldier open fire as he was speaking, injuring seven students. Students began to demand the removal of soldiers stationed within the university grounds, but were eventually calmed down by the Dean. However, at around 11pm, a male student was shot in circumstances that remain unclear, and the student union president's car came under attack as he attempted to rush him to the hospital.

On Saturday, January 29th, the situation deteriorated further as students poured onto the streets to confront Muslim youths who had mobilized after their morning prayers. By 9 am, homes and business premises in the area had been set on fire. As youths from the predominantly Christian community of Farin Gada rushed to the scene to protect shops from looters, soldiers opened fire on them after allegedly mistaking them for arsonists. By midday, fourteen students had been admitted to Jos's Bingham University Teaching Hospital, along with around seven youths from Farin Gada, who were shot after a soldier deliberately took aim at civilians. Among his victims was six-year-old Julius Jokta, who was shot in the stomach.

Describing the circumstances of his son's death, Mr. Joel Jokta told CSW's sources, "The soldiers came and confronted the youth, and while the other soldiers shot in the air, this one who is a Fulani brought his gun down and shot at the crowd and little Julius was shot in the belly and the bullet exited at the back." The soldier was eventually admitted to a military hospital after reportedly being shot by a fellow soldier.

In response to the shootings, angry youths targeted Muslim businesses and homes, particularly around the Rock Haven area. Reprisals continued on Sunday morning, when a small group of youths attempted to attack Yelwa Village, situated approximately five kilometers from Jos, but were driven back by mobile policemen.

CSW National Director Stuart Windsor said, "Security forces were stationed at Jos University in order to prevent unwarranted assaults on students, who in the past have been viewed as soft targets. However, it appears some soldiers may be guilty of a serious dereliction of duty. Instead of defending students, some are allowing serious assaults to occur in their presence, and are even creating reasons to attack those they are meant to be defending. This weekend's unfortunate developments, which include the appalling murder of a six-year-old child, once again underline the urgent need for a comprehensive review of existing security arrangements for Plateau State."

Notes to Editors:

1. On January 18, military spokesman Captain Charles Ekeocha told the BBC that the Nigerian army was given permission to shoot-to-kill to retain order in Jos.
2. The composition of the hierarchy of officers in the Plateau State Police Command does not reflect religious diversity, as required by the federal character principle. All of the higher ranks, including the Commissioner of Police and his deputy, as well as the Assistant Commissioner in charge of the Criminal Investigations Department, are Muslim.