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NIGERIA Thousands of women march through Jos in protest against violence

The central Nigerian city of Jos was brought to a standstill yesterday as thousands of women dressed in black marched through the streets to protest the continuing violence in Plateau State.

The women, some of whom were half-dressed in a cultural sign of deep mourning and desperation, marched to the state governor's official residence in Jishe, where they also denounced discrimination against Christians in northern Nigeria and called for the military forces stationed in Jos, which are viewed as biased, to be replaced by the mobile police.

The group's spokesperson Rhoda Awang said, 'Women are killed and children are killed. Pregnant women are killed and the babies cut out of their wombs. We have local chiefs in all the 17 Local Government Councils. Where are they and what are they doing? We have former governors, where are they? Where is Yakubu Gowon (the former Nigerian President who is from Plateau State)? If the people are killed in the state who will they rule over?'

The women's anger was further fuelled by the deaths of a woman and child during an attack on a village in Vom on the previous night, and they made clear their rejection of any federally instituted state of emergency in Plateau State. They also called on Plateau State Governor Jonah Jang to relocate Jos's Motor Park and the Vegetable Market from the Bauchi Road and Farin Gada areas, as several non-Muslims have disappeared there.

In response, Governor Jang pleaded for restraint and understanding, adding that a gradual withdrawal of troops was already underway.

CSW has also learned that a service on Sunday, January 30, at the Methodist Church in the center of Bauchi Town in Bauchi State was disrupted when a bomb, concealed in a laptop bag, was left under a pew at the back of the church by a young man who entered the building toward the end of the service, and later fled on a waiting motorcycle.

Church ushers threw the bag out of the building and called the police who, upon opening the bag, immediately cleared the area and blocked off the street. The bomb squad arrived half an hour later and defused what turned out to be a large explosive device. "They said we should thank God it did not explode because no one would have survived", Reverend Timothy Aneke told CSW. "I replied that God would not have allowed it to explode".

CSW National Director Stuart Windsor said, "We give thanks for the miraculous escape of the Methodist Congregation. When viewed in light of last year's bombings in Jos and the continuing attacks on churches in Maiduguri, this incident becomes even more worrying, and CSW is calling for increased prayer for the Church in northern Nigeria, and increased vigilance on the part of state and federal authorities. CSW also salutes the women of Plateau State, who once again have taken the lead in protesting the perplexing failure of an army so well-versed in peacekeeping abroad to protect the most vulnerable members of its own society. While it is good to learn that this failure is being addressed officially, for the sake of vulnerable communities any change must be urgent, not gradual."

Notes to Editors:

1. Last week the town of Tafawa Balewa in Bauchi State witnessed sectarian violence following a disagreement between youths that left several dead and churches and mosques destroyed. Security forces intervened to end the violence, and reconciliation meetings have reportedly been held.