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NIGERIA Concerns about impartiality as military takes over security for Jos

Following two weeks of conflict and two bomb attacks on Sunday, September 11, Nigeria's President Goodluck Jonathan announcement placing Chief of Defense Staff Air Vice Marshall Oluseyi Petinrin in charge of security matters in Plateau State and permitting the military to "take all necessary measures" to end the violence is generally welcomed as an acknowledgement of the seriousness of the situation there. However, concerns remain following repeated reports from eyewitnesses of military complicity in much of the violence.

Tensions began to rise in Jos in Plateau State as the end of Ramadan approached and news emerged of plans to make use of a Muslim prayer ground, which had long been in disuse.

As rumors spread that Boko Haram members would be present at the prayer service in Rukuba Road, where several people had died during the 2010 Christmas Eve bombings, angry non-Muslim youths vowed to disrupt the service in retaliation for the disruption of Christmas. To avert potential violence, the State Security Services (SSS) vetoed use of the prayer ground, and recommended use of an alternative location. However, the Izala sect led by Sheikh Yahya Jingir, ignored the security directive and descended on the area on Monday, August 29, heavily armed and with a military escort. As anticipated, heavy fighting broke out. Properties and vehicles were destroyed, including the Christ Apostolic Church in Sarkin Mangu, and at least sixteen people were killed, including a pastor, who was mutilated and burnt.

The violence continued throughout that week, with an unknown number of lives lost. The injured included four soldiers, who according to the spokesperson of the Special Task Force (STF), required medical attention. However, once again there were indications of the military fracturing on religious lines. The community of Rigip near Abattoir/Dogon Karfe recently expressed fears of imminent military retaliation after being wrongly accused of shooting soldier. However, reports are now circulating that some military personnel may in fact have been shot by fellow soldiers angered by their displays of bias.

Meanwhile night-time raids on villages by armed Fulani tribesmen targeting the Berom tribe resumed in earnest, with at least 50 people killed in seven attacks that occurred between September 3-10. The dead included women and children, and in two instances entire families were murdered. Survivors of an attack on the village of Vwang Kogot in Jos South on September 10 where fourteen members of the same family died report their assailants were accompanied by men in military uniform.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW welcomes the decisive action by the national government to take over the security arrangements in Jos, however this can only be effective if the military remains impartial and biased elements are weeded out. Robust measures are needed to protect the vulnerable citizens in Jos, bring those responsible for the violence to justice and restore the confidence of a significant proportion of the population in the security services. The continuation of night time raids on un-armed villagers, which began in March 2010, is a major source of concern, with entire families, particularly of the Berom ethnicity, being wiped out. We urge the government to also address the indiscriminate killing of men, women and children in what effectively amounts to the ethnic cleansing of the Berom people."

Notes to Editors:

1. According to eyewitnesses, two non-Muslim youths were killed and a mobile policeman was injured after heavy fighting broke out between soldiers and youths in the Dogon Karfe area, where non-Muslim passers-by were attacked by Hausa security personnel. Two days earlier a family driving along the Bauchi Ring Road was allegedly stopped at a checkpoint and asked whether or not they were Christians. After affirming that they were, the family was allowed to pass, but a soldier reportedly opened fire on the vehicle as it drove off, injuring one passenger in the eye.