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NIGERIA Boko Haram violence forces indigenous northern Christians to consider relocation

Nigerian Christians from tribes indigenous to Yobe State are increasingly being forced to consider relocating from their ancestral home as a result of the activities of the Boko Haram Islamist militia group.

On the evening of Wednesday, January 4, Boko Haram launched attacks in three northern states, hours after the expiry of its deadline for Christians to leave the north, and almost a week after President Jonathan had instituted a state of emergency in the most violence-prone areas of four states and temporarily closed the nation's borders with Cameroon, Chad and Niger.

In the Yobe State capital Damaturu, gunmen attacked a Christian compound in Gashu'a Road, killing two people and wounding several others. The militia also murdered the head of Pompomari Ward and bombed a beer parlor in an area known locally as Kandahar. In Borno State, suspected Boko Haram gunmen shot and killed the head of Shehuri Ward in Maiduguri. However, two bombs that exploded close to the Customs office claimed no casualties. In Jigawa State, a teenage girl died in crossfire when dozens of suspected Boko Haram gunmen attacked a police station in Birniwa Local Council, wounding a policeman and allegedly planting a bomb that was later disarmed.

Violence continued yesterday evening, as gunmen attacked a meeting at a Deeper Life church in the Gombe State capital, killing six people, including the pastor's wife, and injuring several others.

Christians in Damaturu have informed Christian Solidarity Worldwide-Nigeria (CSW-N) of reports indicating that Boko Haram would be changing tactics in order to circumvent the state of emergency. Sources told CSW-N, "We have learned that they have taken note of areas where people gather, have marked Christian houses and churches, and will be attacking house by house at night."

While some Christians from southern tribes are returning to their original areas, the majority of Christians in Yobe, as in other northern and central states, are from indigenous tribes and have no other home. CSW was told, "We have our farmlands, houses and everything here. Our great, great grandparents were born here. It is our forefather's land, yet we are being left with the choice of relocating to a safer area until things improve, or staying here to die".

Commenting on an ultimatum issued last week by Niger Delta militants threatening retaliation against northern Muslims in the south if Boko Haram continued killing southerners in the north, one local source in Yobe said, "Now there is going to be reprisal in the east, which will trigger more violence and bloodshed. If that happens, if not for God's intervention, this country could be divided and indigenous Christians like us in Yobe will be in a terribly dangerous position."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We extend our heartfelt condolences to the families of those who died, and to those who were injured in these senseless attacks. The stated aim of Boko Haram's campaign of violence is to forcibly institute its particular brand of Islam throughout Nigeria, and is untenable in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation. If the security situation does not improve and Boko Haram systematically targets Christian houses in Yobe, people will eventually have no choice but to leave the area, and many indigenous

Christians may ultimately be forced out of their ancestral homes. We urge the Nigerian authorities to institute stringent night-time patrolling of Damaturu's predominantly Christian areas as a matter of urgency in order to ensure a return of public confidence".