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NIGERIA | Twelve Die in Christmas Attacks on Churches in Nigeria

Six people were killed and two injured when gunmen attacked a church service in a village in Yobe State on Christmas morning. Six others were murdered in an assault on a Christmas Eve service in Borno State in northern Nigeria.

According to local sources, gunmen suspected to be members of the Islamist extremist militia, Boko Haram, raided Firi Village, situated around 1 ½ miles north of Potiskum Town, during the early hours of Christmas day. They began by attacking the midnight service at the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN), where six people were killed, including the church's pastor.

As the attack was underway, residents, many of whom had fled into the bush, sent text messages stating their homes were being set alight and that the security services were yet to arrive at the scene. According to reports received by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), twenty homes and the COCIN church were subsequently razed to the ground.

Local news agencies report that in neighboring Borno State, gunmen attacked a Christmas Eve service at the First Baptist Church in the capital city, Maiduguri, killing six people, including a deacon.

Since December 2010, over 45 Christians in five northern states have died in consecutive attacks on Christmas services by Boko Haram. If the recent attacks are confirmed to have been the work of the group, this would constitute the third consecutive year of fatal attacks by Boko Haram on Christmas services and raise the death toll in such attacks to over 55 people.

In his Christmas message, Pope Benedict spoke of hope and peace and prayed, amongst other things, for the return of "concord in Nigeria, where savage acts of terrorism continue to reap victims, particularly among Christians."

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of CSW said, "The courage and commitment of Christians in Yobe, Borno and other northern and central states, who continue to celebrate their faith despite the very real threat of violence, is both inspiring and humbling. For the third year in a row, we have witnessed cowardly attacks on innocent people who were merely expressing their faith during a significant date in the Christian calendar, a date that symbolizes peace and reconciliation. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families that have lost loved ones in these

appalling attacks, and along with our sister organization in Nigeria, we will continue to pray, hope and work for peace and reconciliation in that nation."