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CAR | Foreign Jihadis Implicated in Catholic Church Attack

Foreign jihadis have been implicated in an attack on Our Lady Fatima Catholic Church in the Km 5 district of Bangui, Central African Republic (CAR), on May 28 that left 18 people dead, including 78-year-old priest Paul-Emile Nzale.

According to eyewitness reports, the attack began with grenades being thrown into the church compound followed by 30 minutes of sustained and indiscriminate gunfire. At the time of the attack, the church was sheltering approximately 5,000 internally displaced people and was a place of refuge for both Christians and Muslims. Eyewitnesses reported the assailants spoke in English and took at least 42 people hostage, some may have been killed.

Seleka has long been known to include Chadians and Sudanese amongst its ranks. In February 2014, following extensive international media coverage in which anti-Balaka forces were described as "Christian militia," Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau threatened to avenge what he termed the massacre in the CAR of Muslims by Christians. Subsequently, several hundred Fulanis were reportedly arrived in northern CAR in vehicles, on horses and on foot during the week of April 21.

In a comment to the Catholic news agency Fides regarding the sighting of foreign jihadis in the Km 5 area, Bishop Nestor Desire Nongo-Aziagbia, Bishop of Bossangoa, said, "Although the authorities pretend not to notice, many Central Africans know that jihadists terrorists from Sudan and Nigeria have infiltrated into the Seleka and are now in the Km 5 district. Likening the anti-Balaka to Christians, the western media offered these criminals a perfect means of propaganda."

Young people took to the streets of Bangui on May 29 following the attack on Our Lady Fatima Catholic Church protesting the lack of protection offered by troops belonging to the International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (MISCA). Some protesters, rumored to be members of the anti-Balaka militia, looted and vandalized a mosque in the Lakouanga neighborhood. There were no reported casualties.

The attack on Our Lady Fatima Church comes at the end of a week of reconciliation organized by Churches in Bangui, bringing Christian and Muslim communities together. While the anti-Balaka groups are generally described as Christian militia, their actions have been condemned by the Church in CAR, which is calling for peace, the disarming of all armed groups and national reconciliation.

Father Nzale's death is the latest incident amid a targeting of clergy. Over Easter, Father Chris Forman Willibona and Rev. Thomas Ndakouzou were killed in separate attacks on April 18 and 19, respectively. The Bishop of Bossangoa, Monsignor Nestor-Desire Nongo Aziagbia was

kidnapped on April 16 with three Catholic clergymen by Seleka militants. The clergymen were eventually released near the Chadian border after the intervention of the international community. In Bangui, The Apostolic Church of Gbaya Domia and the Dombia Baptist Church were attacked on April 8 and 17, respectively.

In April, the UN Security Council voted in favor of sending a 12,000-strong UN Peacekeeping force to CAR in September 2014 to bolster security across the whole country and help to steer the interim government to institute democratic elections by early 2015.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "Our condolences, thoughts and prayers are with the families of those who have lost their lives. CSW condemns the senseless attack on unarmed and vulnerable civilians and deplores the targeting and destruction of places of worship, regardless of their creed. We appeal for adequate protection of facilities housing internally displaced populations and continue to echo the calls of religious leaders in the country who are working tirelessly towards reconciliation in the face of relentless atrocities. We also call for increased assistance for the administration of Interim President Samba-Panza in its efforts to disarm the various militia groups, to encourage reconciliation and facilitate the return of one million displaced citizens to their homes."