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NIGERIA | Boko Haram Targets Christian Communities

Christian communities in the Gwoza Local Government Area (LGA) of Borno State, northeast Nigeria are under sustained attack from the Islamist terror group, Boko Haram.

Nine people died June 1 when Boko Haram gunmen stormed the morning service of the Church of the Brethren (Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria, EYN,) in Attagara village, near Gwoza Town. The nine men were reportedly members of the church's security group. In a subsequent exchange, several assailants were killed and three captured. According to emerging reports, sect members attacked Attagara again on June 3 to avenge the deaths, practically razing the village before moving on to substantially destroy most of Amuda Village and attack Ngoshe Village.

Also on June 1, sect members attacked Gwoshe Town in Gwoza, burning down two EYN churches and several homes and shops. According to the News Agency Morning Star, prior to these attacks 21 Christians were killed during an assault on a Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) building in Gwoza Town on May 25. The following evening, eight people died and several were wounded when Boko Haram gunmen stormed Chinene village in Chikide-Joghode-Kaghum Ward, destroying six churches and razing several homes.

Last Sunday's attacks occurred less than 24 hours after the burial of the Emir of Gwoza, Idrissa Timta. The Emir was assassinated in an ambush by Boko Haram members on May 30 as he rode to Gombe State in a convoy with two other Emirs to attend the funeral of the recently-deceased Emir of Gombe. In an indication of the degree of insecurity in the area, the Borno State Governor, one of the few dignitaries to attend the Emir's burial, was accompanied by 150 soldiers and special police squads, passing 16 deserted towns, villages and hamlets before reaching Gwoza, while family members remained in Maiduguri.

Shortly before his death, the Emir had spoken of an increase in terrorist attacks in Gwoza and called for military patrols. Local Christians had been calling for increased security for well over a year. Isolated communities in the Gwoza Hills have been particularly hard hit by terrorist violence. In April 2013, three church leaders from COCIN and one from EYN were shot dead by gunmen on motorcycles while relaxing near church premises. In June 2013, sect members armed with explosives and petrol bombs attacked the Hwa'a, Kunde, Gathahure and Gjigga communities in the Gwoza Hills, torching their churches, and slitting the throat of a retired COCIN pastor in Hwa'a following his refusal to convert to Islam. The sect also assassinated the village heads of Kurana Bassa and Damboa. In April, two people were killed and two churches were torched in the Hrazah and Hemba communities. In October 2013, a nurse and a prison guard were killed in their homes in Gadamayo Ward. In a November 2013, an open letter to the Borno State Governor accusing him of negligence, the Gwoza Christian Community Association (GCCA) said Boko Haram had destroyed 46 predominantly Christian villages in the area, forcing

more than 14,000 Christians to flee elsewhere in Nigeria or into neighboring Cameroon.

In April 2014, Boko Haram members reportedly raised the sect's flag in Gwoza's Ashigashiya Ward, declaring it their headquarters. Morning Star reported that in April, Bitrus Yahi, an EYN pastor, was abducted and is still missing, and the wife of an EYN pastor and their teenage son who were abducted on May 11 near Gwoza Town have also disappeared. In May, Boko Haram attacked Limankara Village, burning shops and homes belonging to the Christians, including the homes of the District Head, the Village Head and a former councilor, all of whom are Christians. Also in May, sect members attacked the border town of Jibrilli, killing four Christians.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "We offer our condolences to those who lost loved ones in last Sunday's attacks. Gwoza LGA is clearly under a sustained assault and the unrelenting series of attacks provides further evidence, if any were needed, of Boko Haram's strategy of religious cleansing targeting of indigenous Christian communities of north-eastern Nigeria, as well as its appalling disrespect for traditional rulers. This persistent targeting of communities on the basis of religion may amount to a war crime and is a clear violation of their right to freedom of religion or belief. It is vital that the Nigerian government ensures adequate protection so that that all of its citizens can exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief without the threat of abduction or death."