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NIGERIA | Leaders Request Action to End “Boko Haram-Led Pogroms”, “Ethnic Cleansing”

Concerned leaders of ethnic nationalities of Borno South Senatorial District have issued a statement highlighting the “Boko Haram-led pogroms” and “ethnic cleansing” currently occurring in predominantly Christian areas of southern Borno State.

In the statement, the community leaders express gratitude for the overwhelming international concern for the female students abducted from the Government Secondary School in Chibok, also in southern Borno State, but warn that focus on these abductions has distracted attention from a continuing campaign of “pillaging and rampaging by Boko Haram” in the area. In an indication of the ferocity of this campaign, within the last four weeks over 46,000 people were displaced into Cameroon, nearby hills or neighboring states, and at least 534 people have died in attacks on 26 communities. Within the last 14 days, Boko Haram reportedly overrun 21 communities in Damboa Local Government Area (LGA), one in Askira Uba LGA, and another in Chibok LGA. In each community the group has removed Nigerian national flags, replacing them with its jihadi one.

Particularly worrying are allegations of possible collusion between Boko Haram and elements within the Nigerian armed forces. According to the statement, after an attack on Ataggara Village June 1 was repelled by local people, community leaders reported the incident to a military outpost in Pulka, and were informed a unit would be sent to Atagara to protect them. The following day men in Nigerian Army attire came to Atagara in nine armored personnel carriers (APCs) bearing Army insignia, claiming they were there to assess the security situation. When the community gathered to hear from them, the men opened fire, killing over 250 men, women and children. Anyone who attempted to escape into the bush and was caught was either stabbed or shot to death.

The campaign is in line with the “mission statement” articulated by Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau in a 2012 video in which he stated categorically that: “this war is not political. It is religious. It is between Muslims and unbelievers (arna). It will stop when Islamic religion is the determinant in governance in Nigeria or, in the alternative, when all fighters are annihilated and no one is left to continue the fight.” Community leaders claim the accelerated violence is part of an effort to influence the outcome of elections in 2015 by altering the area’s religious demography: “It is on record that the Middle Belt, which the Southern Borno State Senatorial Zone is a bona fide part of, voted massively for President Goodluck Jonathan; a fact that enabled the sitting President to succeed at the polls in 2011.”

In light of the Boko Haram declaration, the statement concludes with an appeal to President

Jonathan to either ensure the protection of the communities, or if this proves impossible, to either supply them with arms for self-defense or to allow “other Nigerians and members of the international community who are so inclined to help arm [them]. ... We have a right to live in peace in our communities and to vote our choice without any fear; however, we choose to do so in electoral contests in our country. That is an irreducible minimum for every citizen.”

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide said, “The statement from the community leaders is further confirmation that Boko Haram has accelerated a self-declared strategy of religious cleansing targeting indigenous Christian communities of north-eastern Nigeria. It is a tragic irony that this is occurring at a time when the international community is focusing more than ever on Boko Haram following the Chibok abductions and that this deplorable crime has obscured the accelerated cleansing of Christian communities in southern Borno from their ancestral lands. The people of Borno South have a right to live, worship and vote without fear or repercussion, and the persistent, violent and deliberate targeting of these communities on the basis of religion and political orientation must amount to a crime against humanity. The Nigerian government must ensure adequate protection of these vulnerable citizens and address and allay their concerns regarding the conduct of elements within the armed forces.”