

Plateau attacks: Protest erupts as death toll hits 33

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Illustration image: Gunmen

| By James Abraham

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A burial service for victims of the Palm Sunday attack in Angwan Rukuba, Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State, erupted into protest on Tuesday as women and youths blocked the church entrance, demanding the release of community members previously arrested in connection with the killings.

The attack, which occurred last Sunday, claimed at least 33 lives after some victims succumbed to injuries in the hospital. Residents expressed outrage over what they described as the wrongful detention of three local youths, insisting the authorities pursue the actual perpetrators.

Tension escalated as the protesters refused to allow the mass burial to proceed until their demands were met, temporarily halting proceedings and highlighting growing frustration over recurring violence and perceived delays in justice in the state.

The protesters, carrying leaves and chanting songs, declared, “We will not allow the burial to take place until our sons are released.”

One of the protesters, Mathew Bulus, said, “Those arrested by soldiers are innocent. They are not the ones who carried out the killings. They should go after the perpetrators and leave our youths alone. We will not let them be detained unfairly.”

The protest heightened tension as about seven corpses of the attack victims were brought to the community.

The protesting women, joined by some youths, locked the entrance of the church where the mass burial was scheduled to be held, calling for the release of three youths from the community arrested by military authorities in connection with investigations into the killings.

There was, however, jubilation at the ECWA Church as the three youths were confirmed released.

Their release brought relief to protesters and mourners as they were formally presented to youth leaders.

Confirming their release, the aggrieved youths thereafter allowed the corpses of the victims to be moved out of the church for interment.

A member of the community, Peter Makenzie, who spoke to our correspondent, said the youths were arrested by the security men deployed to contain the situation last Wednesday.

Speaking at the burial, the Chief of Staff to the Governor, Jeremiah Satmark, said the death toll from the Palm Sunday attack had risen to 33, with some victims succumbing to injuries in the hospital.

He disclosed that some victims died in hospital after the initial toll stood at 28.

Satmark, who represented the governor at the funeral service, insisted that the government would do everything possible to bring the perpetrators to justice.

“The government is working tirelessly to unravel the motive behind these killings and bring an end to the violence on the Plateau.

“This attack was meant to break our unity, but it will not succeed,” he said.

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He assured bereaved families that efforts were ongoing to identify the perpetrators and bring them to justice, while urging residents to remain vigilant and prayerful.

Satmak also announced that the three youths arrested in the wake of the attack had been released.

The Chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Plateau State chapter, Rev Gomwalk Dunkan, noted that it was time for stakeholders to hold very difficult conversations to find a lasting solution to the unending killing of Christians in the state.

He emphasised that sustainable peace could only be achieved through justice.

“There can be no peace without justice. The government must ensure that justice is served for lasting peace to return,” he said.

Other speakers at the event, including the Director General of the Plateau Peace Building Agency, Dr Joyce Sanda and the former Speaker of the state House of Assembly, Titus Alams, urged the people to remain calm and continue to show the kind of leadership they demonstrated in the past days.

“The security agencies need to up their game in ensuring that such events do not happen again,” Alams insisted.

Our correspondent reports that only seven corpses out of the over 28 other victims were brought to the church for funeral service on Tuesday.

It was learnt that many other victims of the attack had been recovered and buried by their families in their preferred locations.

Gunmen suspected to be bandits had attacked Angwan Rukuba and the Gari Ya Waye area on Palm Sunday night, killing over 28 people on the spot and injuring several others.

The attackers stormed the densely populated community around 8 pm and opened fire indiscriminately on residents.

President Bola Tinubu, who visited Plateau State last week following the attack, commiserated with the victims’ families and directed security agencies to arrest the perpetrators.

He also ordered the installation of over 5,000 Artificial Intelligence-enabled CCTV cameras across the state to enhance 24-hour surveillance and combat insecurity.

Governor Caleb Mutfwang, who had earlier visited the scene, vowed that justice would be served and the perpetrators would not go unpunished.

He described the attack as a heinous and well-orchestrated act aimed at destabilising the state.