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Soldiers kill two in Jos as electoral officer is lynched over voter registration row

TUESDAY, 18 JANUARY 2011 00:00 REUTERS



Three people were killed in Jos on Monday when soldiers opened fire to quell a fight between Christian and Muslim youths over voter registration for April elections, police and witnesses said.

Soldiers opened fire at a secondary school being used as a voter registration centre in the city of Jos after a group of Christian youths tried to prevent Muslim electoral commission officials from delivering voting materials, witnesses said.

Schools across Nigeria have been closed for the voter registration exercise, which began on Saturday, and there were no children at the venue at the time.

"We tried to pacify them but they grew wild," Plateau state police commissioner Abdulrahman Akano told reporters.

"They started stoning the soldiers and the soldiers had no choice than to open fire on them in self-defence," he said, adding two of the youths were killed by the gunfire.

One electoral official was lynched and burned, bringing the death toll to three, while two soldiers were wounded, a spokesman for a joint military and police taskforce said.

Plateau state, of which Jos is the capital, lies in the "Middle Belt" where the mostly Muslim north meets the largely Christian south. It has seen years of ethnic tensions and is a major potential flashpoint ahead of the April elections.

The latest unrest brings the death toll in and around Jos to more than 100 since Christmas, when there were a series of bomb blasts and subsequent clashes in the city.

Some members of the Christian community have accused the security forces of backing the mostly Muslims Hausa-Fulani ethnic group during the unrest. The rank-and-file of the army are from both religions but senior officers stationed in the region are predominantly Muslim, they say.

The military denies the accusations.

Hundreds of people died in fighting between Muslim and Christian mobs in the Middle Belt a year ago and there have been frequent outbreaks of violence since then.

The tension is rooted in decades of resentment between indigenous groups, mostly Christian or animist, who are vying for control of fertile farmlands and for economic and political power with migrants and settlers from the north.

President Goodluck Jonathan, who is from the southern Niger Delta, won the ruling party primaries last week and is considered the front-runner in the presidential race on April 9.

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