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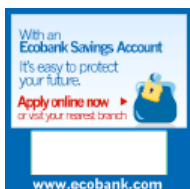
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Nigerian town may relax curfew as violence subsides

Mon 1 Dec 2008, 8:25 GMT

By Randy Fabi

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JOS, Nigeria (Reuters) - Authorities in the central Nigerian town of Jos may relax a curfew on Monday after the army quelled clashes between Muslim and Christian gangs which killed hundreds of people.

Nuhu Gagara, Plateau state information chief, said there had been no reports of violence overnight and that state governor Jonah Jang would meet with security chiefs to discuss easing a 24-hour curfew imposed on the worst-hit neighbourhoods.



"The curfew will not be lifted today, but it could be relaxed," Gagara told Reuters.

Rival ethnic and religious gangs have burned homes, shops, mosques and churches in two days of fighting triggered by a disputed local election in the city, which lies at the crossroads of Nigeria's Muslim north and Christian south.

It is the worst unrest in Africa's most

populous nation for years.

Gagara said on Sunday that the preliminary figures from the police showed around 200 people had been killed. But witnesses put the death toll much higher.

An official at the main mosque, Murtala Sani Hashim, who has been registering the dead as they are brought in, told Reuters he had listed 367 bodies. A senior doctor at the Jos University Teaching Hospital said he had received 25 dead and 154 wounded.

Nigeria's 140 million people are split almost equally between Muslims and Christians and the two communities generally live peacefully side by side.

But ethnic and religious tensions in the country's "Middle Belt" run deep. Hundreds have been killed in ethnic-religious fighting in Jos, capital of Plateau state, in the past.

The tensions are rooted in decades of resentment by indigenous minority groups, mostly Christian or animist, who are vying for control of fertile farmlands with migrants and settlers from the Hausa-speaking Muslim north.

The latest clashes between gangs of Muslim Hausas and mostly Christian youths began early on Friday and were provoked by a local government chairmanship election after news spread that the ANPP party candidate backed by Hausas had lost the race.

Results showed the ruling PDP party candidate won but his swearing in, originally due on Monday, has been postponed.

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