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## Fresh bloodbath in Benue, 2 Catholic priests, 17 others killed by herdsmen

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By Sam Eyoboka, Wahab Abdullah, Johnbosco Agbakwuru & Peter Duru

**Makurdi** — Suspected herdsmen in the early hours of yesterday, stormed St. Ignatius Catholic Church, Ukpör-Mbalom Parish, Gwer East Local Government Area of Benue State, killing two Catholic priests and 17 parishioners.



The latest attack came barely four days after the murder of 10 persons by herdsmen in neighbouring Guma Local Government Area and the destruction of 300 houses by men suspected to be military personnel in Naka, Gwer West Local Government Area of the state.

***Vanguard*** learned that several persons sustained bullet wounds, while the invaders also sacked part of

the village, razing close to 60 houses, huts, and farmland, economic trees as well as food barns of their victims.

According to a source, the deceased were members of the parish who were in the church to attend the 5:30am Mass and burial ceremony.

He said: “There is usually the daily 5:30am mass which many parishioners attend. The services had barely started and worshippers were still coming for the Mass after which a burial ceremony would take place when sounds of rapid gunshots rent the air.

“People started scampering and wailing, 19 persons, including Reverend Fathers Joseph Gor and Felix Tyolaha, who were holding the morning Mass were gunned down in cold blood, while many sustained injuries, including bullet wounds.

“After attacking the church, the invaders descended on the community and razed over 60 houses, farmland, food barns after carting away what the people had in their barns.

“As usual, after killing the helpless worshippers and razing the community, the attackers fled from the scene.

“As I speak with you, part of the community is on fire and deserted. People are fleeing to neighbouring villages, hoping to find a safe haven for their families.”

Reacting through a statement, the Director of Communications Catholic Diocese of Makurdi, Father Moses Iorapuu, confirmed the attack.

### **Catholic church laments**

The statement read: “Rev Fathers Joseph Gor and Felix Tyolaha have been confirmed dead in the deadly attack by herdsmen/Jihadists early today (yesterday) on Mbalom village and St. Ignatius Quasi Parish Ukp-or-Mbalom.

“In their classic style, they burnt down homes, destroyed food items and killed at will. The police seem to know nothing of the attacks which have been going on in other villages within Benue State since the Anti Open Grazing Law came into effect last year.

“Many people are asking why the international community has remained silent over the massacre of Benue citizens? The answer is simple: It has been the goal of the Jihadists to conquer Benue and Tiv people who resisted their advance into the Middle Belt and the Eastern part of Nigeria since 1804; the people who rejected Islam and fought for the unification of Nigeria in the civil war of 1967-1970.

“The people of Eastern Nigeria, therefore, have little sympathy for Benue people who fought on the side of Nigeria. The Muslim North is enjoying a sweet revenge overshadowed by an insensitive regime.

“There were over 170,000 internally displaced persons before the Naka invasion and surely with the current situation in Mbalom, Benue will be flooded with thousands more. What cannot be said at this point is the consequences of the death of Missionaries in the silent killings that have been ignored by the government for over a year.

“The Catholic Diocese of Makurdi, which is one of the largest Dioceses in Nigeria, has been active in providing relief materials including education and skills acquisition lessons. To go for the Priests means total destruction of everything we stand for and believe in, as a people!”

### **Tension in Makurdi**

Meanwhile, there is palpable tension in Makurdi town as the bloody attack has sparked angry reactions from youths in the town who took over the popular Wurukum roundabout and Vandeikya Street junction in protest over the killings.

The irate youths made bonfires at both points, stopping all vehicular movements from parts of the country at the Wurukum roundabout.

The development has also forced owners of business outlets in the town, including those doing business in the popular Makurdi Modern Market and banks to close shop for fear of being attacked by hoodlums.

People of northern extraction doing business in the town were also seen moving in droves back to Wadata, an Hausa settlement in Makurdi town for fear of being attacked by the irate youths.

It took the intervention of the Police who fired teargas canisters to disperse the surging crowd of angry youths in parts of the town from unleashing mayhem in the state capital.

Reacting, the Acting Governor of Benue State, Mr. Benson Abounu, said the government and people of the state are saddened by the incident, adding that the state is under siege.

Abounu said: “The governor, myself and the entire people of the state are very sad because I can put it now that Benue is under siege.

“We have been attacked from all corners and this is unacceptable. What happened today is a calculated attack, well planned and executed.

“They must have taken their time, they hit their targets and they got what they desired to do.

“As I talk to you, I have got information, I waited all day to get the right information before I brief the press.

“I have spoken with the Commissioner of Police who had been there himself with his team and had seen the victims. He was able to see 16 corpses, one had earlier been brought to Makurdi and as I talk to you now, all the corpses have been brought to Makurdi.

“I understand that two Reverend Fathers were killed right inside the church. This is a new dimension in the attacks, it has never happened before; therefore, it is very worrying.

“I also understand that 17 other people lost their lives, making a total of 19. You can, therefore, see why I said this is another black day in the history of Benue State.

“The Commissioner of Police has deployed enough men to the place who are already there. As we speak, the Commanding Officer of 72 Special Forces has also deployed a good number of soldiers to the place.”

## Police confirm killings

Confirming the attack, Benue State Police Commissioner, Fatai Owoseni, said the command received information that suspected herdsmen numbering about 30 carried out the attack.

Owoseni said: “We got information that some bandits suspected to be herdsmen attacked Mbalom community, killing two Reverend Fathers.

“We went there and discovered that they invaded the village around 5am and they were about 30 in number. They attacked the venue of a burial ceremony and also attacked the church where the two Reverend Fathers who were holding Mass, also to conduct the burial ceremony, were killed.

“At the time we visited, we were able to recover 16 bodies from the scenes of the attack and those of the two priests. The terrain is made up of thick forests but we are working assiduously and we are combing the entire area and the bushes. We will go after them.

“We are currently working on every piece of information that will help us track these people and bring them to justice.”

Meanwhile, Governor Samuel Ortom through a statement by his Chief Press Secretary, CPS, Terver Akase, announced his decision to cut short his three weeks leave to take full charge of the state.

The statement read: “Governor Samuel Ortom has cut short his vacation to return home and address the security challenge occasioned by the on-going killings of Benue people by armed herdsmen.

“In the Governor’s absence, the Acting Governor, Engineer Benson Abounu has done a commendable job.”

## **It's despicable and satanic— Buhari**

Reacting to the killing, yesterday, President Muhammadu Buhari described it as despicable and satanic.

President Buhari, who also said the action of the murderers was sacrilegious in a statement by his Special Adviser on Media and Publicity, Chief Femi Adesina in Abuja, said those behind the act would be fished out to face the consequences of their wicked act.

He said: “I extend my sincere condolences to the government and people of Benue State, the Mbalom community, and especially the Bishop, priests and members of the St Ignatius’ Catholic Church, whose premises was the unfortunate venue of the heinous killings by gunmen.

“This latest assault on innocent persons is particularly despicable. Violating a place of worship, killing priests and worshippers is not only vile, evil and satanic, it is clearly calculated to stoke up religious conflict and plunge our communities into endless bloodletting.”

Stressing that the country will not bow to the machinations of evildoers, President Buhari vowed that the assailants would be hunted down and made to pay for the sacrilege.

## **Stop killings or forget 2019— CAN**

In its reaction, Christian Association of Nigeria., CAN, yesterday, called on all churches in the country to devote time on Sunday, April 29, 2018, to organise peaceful protests to express the Church’s disgust over the inability of government to arrest the increasing orgy of killings of innocent Christians across the country.

Speaking to ***Vanguard***, the National President of CAN, Rev. Samson Olasupo Ayokunke, said he has directed all churches in the country to protest against these unending orgy of violence.

He said: “I have directed that all the Christian churches in Nigeria should all protest around their churches on Sunday, April 29 and they should let the television stations cover it or use their phones and send it on to the social media.

”They should say no to bloodshed, Mr. President should put an end to blood shed, we do not need blood shed anymore in this nation, enough is enough.

”Number two: Release Leah Sharibu now and all other Chibok girls in captivity or he should forget 2019. The magic wand the federal government used to release Dapchi girls, the same magic wand must be used to release other Christian girls. As long as Leah Sharibu is in captivity, the burden of her captivity is on the government because the negotiation with Boko Haram that led to the release of others leaving one on the basis of religion and this has put a dent on the government. It is an unwise and unacceptable negotiation. We are saying enough is enough.

”All Christians should go on protest on that Sunday, if they want to kill all of us, they should go ahead and kill us. This is a direct assault on all Christians; for these killers to go to a Catholic Church and kill people in the same Benue that has been under siege is unacceptable,” he ended.

## **MURIC reacts**

Reacting, Professor Lakin Akintola, Executive Director of Muslim Rights Concern, MURIC, said: “Any act of killing is condemnable. However, all over the country, Nigerians are not respecting the law; Nigerians are at each other’s throats.

“This is because some people are preaching hate. A lot of people preach hate in the mosques and the churches. Particularly, our Christian brothers have been vehement on preaching hate speech on daily basis. All these noise about Islamisation are causing some of all these problems. We need to stop all these for us to have peace in the country.”

### **I have Buhari’s mandate – Osinbajo**

Meanwhile, the Vice President, Prof. Yemi Osinbajo, said yesterday that President Buhari has given him the mandate to tackle religious persecution in the country.

Osinbajo, who disclosed this while dedicating the ultra-modern headquarters of Deeper Life Bible Church located in Gbagada area of Lagos State, valued at over N5 billion, said: “The President has mandated that I take up those cases in specific states and local authorities. The right to freedom of worship is also a right to build places of worship.

“Second is the physical persecution of Christians, a phenomenon we have seen for years. Just this morning on my way here, I was notified of the violation of a Catholic Church in Benue State by armed killers who went there while burial mass was taking place and they killed the priests and some worshippers.

“It’s not only a heinous sacrilege, but high wickedness to kill persons in a place of worship. As I discuss these issues with the President and other ministers in the security council, it’s evident to me and to many that the devil’s bigger agenda is to stoke up a religious conflict in Nigeria that will make it impossible for anyone to preach the gospel or even for Muslims to worship in their mosques.

“A few days ago in Bama, a mosque was burnt and many people died. Many such examples abound. While the security agencies continue to work relentlessly to hunt down the perpetrators of ths evil acts, to bring a permanent end to all of the

killings that are going on in the name of insurgents, Herdsmen or any other name, we as a Body of Christ must not lose focus.

“We are called to bring men and women to salvation—all men, even those who kill and persecute us. The enemy wants us to stand on our pulpits and preach hate, we will not! We will obey the Lord Jesus Christ who said we must love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

“Governance is spiritual warfare. I ask that you pray for everyone of us who is in the position of authority in this land.”

Taking a cue from the biblical Book of Esther, Prof. Osinbajo acknowledged that the devil is even more desperate and devious as the end comes nearer, stressing that governance especially in this end time is a spiritual warfare that requires a joint spiritual battle to tackle, and like Esther, the Church must rise and fast and pray for them in authority, vowing that “if they perish, they perish.”

### **Ambode lauds Kumuyi**

The Lagos State Governor, Mr. Akinwunmi Ambode who was represented by the state Commissioner for Women Affairs and Poverty Alleviation, Mrs. Lola Akande, also congratulated the church leadership for the dedication of the church which he hoped will bring transformation to the state at a time like this.

In his address at the inauguration, the General Superintendent of the Deeper Life Bible Church, Pastor William Folorunsho Kumuyi said the auditorium itself comes complete with modern and latest facilities and equipment for the comfort and convenience of worshippers.

According to him “the main building consists of a four storey amphitheater with central air conditioning units, chiller farm, and air handling units.