

Table of Contents

- ***Kidnap in Niger of US missionary a 'terrible tragedy'***
 - ***A year after 70 churches destroyed in anti-'Charlie' riots***
-

Kidnap in Niger of US missionary a 'terrible tragedy'

World Watch Monitor (20.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2fkwxMN> - The kidnap of a pioneering American missionary in Niger is a "terrible tragedy" for the communities he served for 24 years, according to the local mayor. It has also raised security concerns among the country's missionary community.

Jeff Woodke, 55, who worked for Jeunesse en Mission Entraide et Developpement (JEMED), a branch of the US-based Youth With a Mission (YWAM), was abducted by unknown assailants late on Friday evening (14 Oct.) from the town of Abalak in northern Niger.

Bilou Mohamed, the mayor of Abalak, told World Watch Monitor the community had "suffered a terrible tragedy" and locals "wept with sorrow, lamenting the loss of a friend" the day after his abduction. He added: "This man has lived among us for years, even in when it has been difficult to accompany vulnerable populations... Everyone knows his goodness."

According to Niger's interior minister, Mohamed Bazoum, a group of armed men – believed to be from a radical Islamic group called Mujao – burst into Woodke's home at around 9pm. After killing two security guards, including a member of the National Guard who was stationed there, the kidnappers took him by force and drove towards eastern Mali, where Mujao has a stronghold.

After Woodke's abduction, the US embassy in Niamey issued a statement advising U.S. citizens "to take appropriate security precautions and to avoid predictable travel patterns within Niger".

Jacques Kagninde, who heads the Esprit Bible College in the Niger capital Niamey and has known Woodke for many years, said he was shocked by the kidnapping. "This is the first time a Christian missionary has been targeted," he said.

Rev. Kagninde said Woodke was "no stranger" to the Tuareg community. "He has lived in the region since 1992 and is perfectly integrated there. He feels at home in Abalak and mixes happily with the local population. He always wears a [Tuareg] turban," he said.

He added that Woodke speaks the region's two main languages: Tamasheq, spoken by the Tuareg, and Fula, the language of the Fulani people.

Woodke is known in Abalak for his devotion to Niger and its nomadic populations. He runs several development projects among the Tuareg, focusing on farming, health, literacy, primary school education and improving access to drinking water, amongst other things.

He has spoken internationally on the impact of climate change on nomadic peoples and is a pioneer of "sustainable nomadism" – enabling nomads to maintain their traditional lifestyles in the face of increasingly frequent drought. He is the only American in his team.

Rev. Kagninde added: "Jeff has given everything for the Tuaregs, which raises the question: how did people of malign intent kidnap a man well-known in the community without arousing the suspicion among the local population, especially given that his house is next to that of the mayor of Abalak? The kidnappers must have been outsiders."

A 'devastating' blow

Martin Brown, a British former missionary to Niger, said Woodke's kidnapping was a shock to the missionary community in Niger and especially to those who know his family. Brown, who worked in Niger for 20 years, said his daughter had attended the same school as Woodke's two sons.

"Jeff was very isolated up in Abalak. He was known by everyone around there, and even though he had a bodyguard, he was still an easy target," said Brown.

Niger has experienced three terrorist attacks in the space of two weeks. One week before Woodke's abduction, 22 soldiers were killed when armed men entered the country from Mali and attacked a refugee camp at Tazalit. On Monday (17 Oct.), gunmen - also believed to have crossed into Niger from Mali - attempted to lay siege to a high-security prison near Niamey, which is holding Malian jihadists and members of Boko Haram.

Abalak lies 400 miles (635km) north-east of Niamey, in the so-called "red zone" that Western embassies advise expatriates to avoid because of kidnapping threats against their citizens, often for ransom. A porous border separates Abalak from northern Mali, where a number of radical Islamic groups, including the Al-Qaeda-linked Ansar Dine, operate freely.

Brown said the kidnapping raised a fundamental question regarding Western missionary activity.

"After the shock of the first few days, the kidnapping could create a climate of fear and raise questions around placing missionaries in remote areas. In the short term, missionary organisations will be minded to not place their personnel in areas considered dangerous, but to centre their activities around large cities, and towards the centre and the south of the country.

"In the long term, it's vital that the strategy is redefined, especially in the north, where Al-Qaeda is rampant, and in the south, which is affected by Boko Haram," he said. "It will be about working out how missions can continue in these areas, without simply withdrawing.

"Any reflection has got to be about a skills transfer - how to form and equip Nigerien Christians for mission."

A year after 70 churches destroyed in anti-'Charlie' riots



World Watch Monitor – (20.01.2016) - A year has passed since the churches in the West African country of Niger experienced the worst attacks in their history, in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris.

On the weekend of 16-17 January 2015, hundreds of angry Islamists ransacked more than 100 Christian properties and churches; shouting "Allahu Akbar" ("Allah is the greatest"). Ten people lost their lives in the violence.

The reconstruction has taken time, but it has now officially begun, after two ceremonies in which cornerstones were put in place. The first was held at the EERN church, (Evangelical Church of the Niger Republic) in the northern district of Boukoki 2, in the capital Niamey. The second took place hours later at the Baptist "Roundabout" church, in the heart of the city.

The ceremonies, attended by dozens, were chaired by the President of the Evangelical Alliance in Niger, Bishop Kimso Boureima.

"We are pleased to officially kick off the reconstruction of both churches. This is really the expression of the faithfulness and goodness of God and of his Church," he said. "Whether at the EERN or at the Baptist church, people were very encouraged."

The two churches are among the worst affected, and also among the most iconic in the capital. Established in 1929, the Baptist church has long symbolised the presence of Protestant Christianity in Niger. It is difficult to visit the city centre without noticing the building. Over the years, it has hosted generations of all geographic and social origins: students, diplomats and businessmen – both expatriates and Nigeriens. On 17 January, this church was among the first targeted by demonstrators.

For a year, it was left abandoned and had become a source of curiosity for passers-by and a hide-out for idlers.

The EERN church is the largest building in the capital. It also symbolised the emergence of a national church attended exclusively by Nigeriens, as Christianity is often associated with foreigners.

But now both new church buildings will be bigger and even more visible, and they will be equipped with modern facilities.

The reconstruction work, due to last a year, is being funded by the US-based Samaritan's Purse. Other reconstruction work is planned in Zinder, Niger's second city, where the violence began on 16 January last year, before spreading to the rest of the country. The violence led around 300 Christians in Niamey (almost half the Christian population in the city) to take refuge in the army barracks.

The commemorative ceremonies have also been marked by a service of thanksgiving, attended by all the Protestant and Evangelical churches, preceded by three days of prayer and fasting – from 14-17 January.

"We have chosen to celebrate this commemoration to express our gratitude for what the Lord has done so far," said Bishop Boureima. "Since the first day of the attacks, we have proclaimed that the Church has forgiven. We must turn the page of the past and look forward. These events came to prepare us for further persecution."

On 16-17 January, 2015, it was Niger's churches that were particularly targeted in widespread violence. The motive was said to be anger at the presence of Niger's President, Mahamadou Issoufou, and five other African heads of state in Paris on 11 January, in what was perceived to be support for an anti-religious magazine. The "memorial" issue of Charlie Hebdo, showing the Prophet Muhammad weeping, reinforced this anger and triggered protests, which quickly turned into anti-Christian violence.

Testimonies

There were mixed emotions during the two ceremonies. Some church attendees were full of joy to witness the beginning of the reconstruction, while others could barely hide their sorrow; particularly those who witnessed the recent demolition works of the old buildings.

"The laying down of the first cornerstone brings us great relief," said Ayeko Jerome, pastor of the Baptist church. "Those who set fire to the church have failed in their evil plan. We are encouraging the people of God to remain strong in their faith, and to persevere in sharing the Good News, which alone can change hearts."

Priscille, 23, a student and member of the Baptist church's choir, added: "The destruction [of the church] by the bulldozer has brought back the older memories of January last year, following the attack. It was truly painful. I cried a lot because our church was well known by all in the capital, but now we will no longer see it again. I have lost my choir costume, the one I wore for years. The choir has lost some instruments, which are irreplaceable."

Elisabeth Abdoulaye, a member of the EERN church in her sixties, said she was devastated to witness the demolition of her old building.

"I shed hot tears when they burned the church last year," she said. "This weekend, I could not prevent myself from bursting into tears when the bulldozer first hit the church's walls. I thought I could stand the shock, but it was too emotional. I am very attached to this church, which I will surely miss forever."

Anger and sorrow

Niger's authorities pledged to support the reconstruction effort in rebuilding damaged and destroyed churches and properties. On 2 July, 2015, the government announced that

it had committed 300 million CFA (about US\$500,000), but the sum has yet to materialise.

This reinforced the feeling that, as the emotion of the first days passed, the reconstruction of churches is no longer of particular interest to political leaders, more concerned with preparations for elections next month.

Christians comprise a small fraction of the 17 million population and are therefore not considered a decisive factor in the elections. This was emphasised when no political leaders attended the church ceremonies.

In October 2015, the Evangelical Alliance said that it no longer required financial aid from the government, saying it would "rather rely on its own resources and the generosity of people of good will to carry out these efforts of reconstruction".

Dozens of people were arrested as part of the investigation carried out by the police into last year's attacks. But according to a local church leader, who wanted to remain anonymous, those arrested are just young demonstrators and idlers.

"They are just small fry, while the masterminds of the attacks are still on the loose," he said. "Though we have forgiven, we want to shed light on what happened: it's a matter of social justice. And we hope that the government will take the necessary measures to prevent the repetition of such events."
