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5 leaders killed in 3 months as Islamists continue to target churches

World Watch Monitor (16.05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2w52q7a> - At least ten more Christians have been killed as a spate of attacks on churches continues in northern Burkina Faso. The ten, who died in two attacks on 12 and 13 May, include another Catholic priest, Siméon Yampa.

On Monday, 13 May, a procession of four Catholics was attacked while they returned a statue of Mary to their church in Singa, 25kms from Kongoussi, reported Fides. The armed men let children go before killing four adults and destroying the statue.

One day earlier between 20 – 30 armed men stormed a Catholic church in the same region, in village of Dablo, 90kms from the city of Kaya, and opened fire on the worshippers. Six people were killed in the attack, among them 34-year-old Fr. Siméon Yampa. The funeral of the victims took place on Monday and was attended by representatives from different religious communities, said Fides.

Before they left, the attackers burned down the church, shops and a health centre, Fides reported.

Also on Monday, suspected militants shot a Catholic priest in Dolbel, western Niger, media reports said. He survived the attack with gunshot wounds to one hand and a leg.

The attacks come two weeks after armed men gunmen raided a Protestant church in Sirgadji village in the north-eastern province of Soum, as reported by World Watch Monitor.

Militants 'parade' around freely

World Watch Monitor has since then learned that the attack in Sirgadji was not the first against a church in Burkina Faso. Since February two other pastors lost their lives in different attacks

Elie Zoré, 48, leader of the Assemblies of God Church of Bouloutou, near the main town of Arbinda in the far north, in the province of Soun, was killed on 23 April 2019.

Arbinda has become symbolic of the nascent Islamist insurgency in Burkina Faso, as one of the areas most affected by it.

In March more than 60 people died in violence that erupted following the killing of a prominent local Muslim cleric, as reported by France 24.

The violence involved the two main ethnic groups: the Fulani, accused of having ties with terrorist groups including the Ansar ul Islam – a homegrown group which emerged in

2016 – and members of the Kouroumba group. Some 30 people died in the inter-communal clashes in the town while another 32 people were killed in terrorist attacks.

Since then, Islamist militants have taken over a number of villages and towns in the area. They ‘parade’ around freely (most of the time on motorbikes and carrying sophisticated weapons), attacking and killing anyone who does not share their radical Islamist ideology, a local source told World Watch Monitor. It was against this backdrop that Elie Zoré was killed. He leaves a widow and six children, the source said.

Killed on the road

The previous month, on 19 February 2019, Pastor Jean Sawadogo, 54, from the local church of Tasmakatt was killed on the road between Tasmakatt and Gorom-Gorom.

Sawadogo was advised to leave his home town in the province of Oudalan for a safer area and had moved to Oudalan’s capital Gorom-Gorom on 1 February. But two weeks later, on the 17th, he returned to his village to offer condolences to the family of his adoptive father (Moussa Segbo, locally known as Moussa Lere) who himself had been killed by armed men.

Given the current climate of insecurity, he decided to return to Gorom-Gorom the same day. But when that night he hadn’t got back, his family tried to phone him, in vain. His church then reported this to the police, and his body was later found on the road. He leaves a widow and seven children.

No group has claimed the killing but many suspect Islamists are known to be active in the region.

Christians in hiding

Meanwhile, the whereabouts of two priests missing between Burkina Faso and neighbouring Niger remains unknown.

Fr. Joël Yougbaré, a parish priest of Djibo, went missing on 17 March as he returned home after celebrating Sunday mass in Bottogui.

In Niger, an Italian missionary, Fr. Pierluigi Maccalli of the Society for African Missions, was kidnapped on 17 September 2018 from his parish near Makalondi.

The threat against churches in the area is becoming more and more obvious. A local church leader, who wants to be anonymous for his security, said: “Christians are now in hiding in the region: no-one dares to sleep in his house overnight, for fear of being killed. It’s very hard for us.”

So far, many Christians have already fled to safer towns further south.

Michel Ouédraogo is President of the Assemblies of God, the largest evangelical denomination in Burkina Faso and the most affected by the Islamist violence so far. It has more than 4000 churches and 5000 pastors across the country.

He acknowledged that the Church was facing difficult times but called on Christians for restraint. “Vengeance has never been the best option. For instance, the God we serve is Love. He invites us to love our neighbour”, he told World Watch Monitor. “May God also touch and change the hearts of those who hide behind an ideology in order to kill their neighbours” he said, before calling on the global Church to pray for the Church in Africa.

'Genocide must stop'

"We are facing serious security challenges in the northern regions of the country", a representative of the Federation of Evangelical Churches and Missions (FEME, for its French acronym) in the region, told World Watch Monitor.

The current climate of insecurity has dramatically affected the daily activities of communities and churches. "Schools are closing one after another, particularly in the towns of Markoye and Gorom-Gorom. The school run by our church in Tin Akoff, has also followed the same trend. Open-air outreach and other [church] gatherings are now banned," he said.

"Since the killing of Pastor Jean Sawadogo, all our pastors in villages and towns along the border with Mali have fled. Seven other churches in Tasmakatt, Tin Akoff, Kassam Est, Gandafabou, Deou, Oursi and Markoye have also been closed. We need your prayers," he added.

Monday's attack was condemned by international leaders. "Appalled by the news coming from Burkina Faso. Once again, a place of worship is the target of violence. Houses of worship should be havens, not targets," U.N. Secretary General António Guterres tweeted while European Parliament President Antonio Tajani on Twitter said, "the genocide against Christians around the world must stop".

Jihadists kill pastor, four others in Burkina church attack

The Jakarta Post (29.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2IUAjzS> - Gunmen killed four worshippers and a pastor in the first jihadist attack on a church in Burkina Faso, security and local sources said Monday, in the latest violence to rock the formerly peaceful west African nation.

Sunday's raid took place in the small northern town of Silgadji near Djibo, the capital of Soum province.

"Unidentified armed individuals have attacked the Protestant church in Silgadji, killing four members of the congregation and the main pastor," a security source told AFP.

"At least two other people are missing," the source added.

It was the first attack on a church since jihadist violence erupted in Burkina Faso in 2015.

Former colonial ruler France has deployed some 4,500 troops in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad in a mission codenamed Barkhane to help local forces try to flush out jihadist groups.

"The attack happened around 1:00 pm, just as the faithful were leaving the church at the end of the service," a member of the church who did not want to be identified told AFP.

"The attackers were on motorbikes. They fired in the air before aiming at the members of the congregation," the witness added.

Burkina Faso has suffered from increasingly frequent and deadly attacks attributed to a number of jihadist groups, including the Ansarul Islam group, the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara.

The raids began in 2015 in the north before targetting the capital Ouagadougou and other regions, notably in the the east.

A total of 350 people have been killed since 2015 -- mainly in hit-and-run raids -- according to an AFP tally.

The jihadist groups regularly target both Muslim and Christian clerics, mainly in the north.

In February, a Spanish Catholic priest, Father Cesar Fernandez, was killed in a raid attributed to jihadists in Nohao in the centre of the country. He was returning from the adjoining country of Togo when it happened.

Fernandez, 72, had been working in Africa since 1982 for the Salesians of Don Bosco order.

'Dramatic deterioration'

In March, gunmen abducted Catholic priest Father Joel Yougbare from Botogui, near Djibo, in the north. The Catholic Church has not yet confirmed reports that his body has since been found.

Several imams have also been killed in the north.

According to security sources, the jihadists do not consider these Muslim clerics sufficiently radical and sometimes accuse them of having collaborated with the authorities.

But religious leaders are not the only people targeted by the extremists. On Friday, jihadists attacked a village school in Maitaougou, in the eastern province of Koulpelogo, killing five teachers and a municipal worker.

Human Right Watch's Sahel director Corinne Dufka recently said that the surge in jihadist violence and a government crackdown had "forced tens of thousands of villagers to flee since early 2019.

"Scores of people have been murdered in what amounts to a dramatic deterioration in the rights situation in northern Burkina Faso," she said last month.

"Villagers are living in fear as both armed Islamists and government forces have demonstrated utter disregard for human life."

Around 4.3 million people have been driven from their homes in the worsening violence that has engulfed the entire Sahel region, including one million over the past year, according to UN humanitarian officials.