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Islamic fundamentalism, not climate change, the driver of violence and killings in Nigeria

AMRI condemns the appalling attack on Catholics as they celebrated Pentecost Sunday at St Francis Church in the Owo district of Ondo's Catholic diocese, in Nigeria.

"We offer our deepest condolences to the grieving families of those killed in the massacre. We call on all our members to remember them in our prayers and to pray for peace", said Abbot Brendan Coffey OSB, President of AMRI.

The attack was unusual in that it occurred in the normally peaceful south of Nigeria. The Nigerian government have linked the killings to the Islamic State West Africa Province group and connected to Fulani bandits, signalling perhaps a new front for Islamic fundamentalists.

AMRI, the representative group for missionaries in Ireland, has close connections across Nigeria. AMRI asked a Nigerian religious ministering on the ground in Nigeria about the attack. The following is a summary of his views.

"It is too simplistic and indeed very painful to link the killings going on right now in Nigeria to climatic change. Anybody living in Nigeria today will consider that such a point of view is grossly disconnected from the reality on the ground.

"The truth is that Nigeria is under siege. From the time the world heard of the kidnapping of the 300 girls from a secondary school by the Boko-Haram terrorist group, there has been a very steady increase in the gravity of what these various terrorist groups in Nigeria are doing.

"There are too many cases of entire villages being wiped-out, churches burnt completely and people killed. There are many Catholic priests kidnapped whose whereabouts are still not known to this very day.

"Last week, in the diocese of Kaduna, there was the funeral Mass of a priest who was kidnapped and killed and whose body could not be retrieved because it was dumped into a river. This priest was visited by his brother on that ill-fated day the kidnapers came, and took both of them away, they demanded for ransom and a lot of money was paid, but they killed his brother before his eyes and later killed him. Southern Kaduna Christians have known no peace for many years now and cannot sleep with both eyes closed.

"When the a number of religious sisters were kidnapped from their convent in March, the police, the army and other security groups were called and they responded, some got to the convent even while the kidnapers were still around, yet not one of them went in to fight to rescue the sisters. The sisters were taken far into the deep forest and kept in captivity for ten days, when they were released they were not looking like anything human.

"Last Friday 10 June, I was returning from a journey and just as I alighted from the bus at our junction the ground was all covered with bullets and then a security agent rushed to us on a motor-

bike screaming "Run, run, run! Kidnappers are operating here, look they got passengers in a vehicle over there, run!"

"Passengers from other vehicles were jumping down and running into the bush in the vicinity of the compound, our workers ran, the priest and parishioners also ran to places where they could hide themselves. Stories like this are commonplace.

"There is a perception that the Nigerian government is not doing enough to combat terrorism against Christians, that it is imposing an Islamic agenda on the entire country from the far north of Nigeria to the Atlantic, to make it an Islamic State.

"Many Nigerians believe that the present administration is aware of who is perpetuating the violence: Boko-Haram, Fulani Herdsmen, Fulani Bandits, Islamic State West Africa Province but slow to condemn and act against them. Even when some of these killers and kidnappers are arrested, they are usually freed sooner or later.

"Most religious communities, not only Christian ones, in the north of Nigeria cannot afford sleeping all night with eyes completely closed, no. Now it has come to the South of Nigeria. This is the reason everyone today says: 'in Nigeria nowhere is safe'.

"Here, we must sleep at night with one eye closed and one open. Today, I am among those advocating for the keeping of knife nearby! Official security forces are very slow to respond. We do not know when it will be our turn, but we know that there will be no notice, and we may survive or not survive. However, these uncertainties do not stop us from living our life as if all is well. We still live our lives, work and plan for the future, a better future."

What these first-hand responses demonstrate is a climate of fear for Christians in Nigeria, where increased violence and acts terrorism are becoming everyday events. The government of Nigeria needs to act, to stop the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, and ensure a fairer representation of all ethnic groups in government offices and services. It needs to focus on poverty, which if not addressed, will continue to provide a recruiting ground for extremist groups.

There are close connections between Nigeria and Ireland, due to the many missionaries who have served there and as well as the great number of Nigerians who form part of the Irish community today. It is important to try to understand what is going on in this great African country and to work for peace and development of all.

- The Association of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland, 16 June 2022.



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AMRI is a registered charity. CHY9301. CRA 20023263. Registered in Dublin, Ireland. CRO 529508.

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