

Communal violence in Nigeria

By Barry Mason
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Communal violence has broken out in the northern Nigerian city of Jos in the Plateau region. It is a city of four million people, 125 miles from the capital Abuja. The fighting began on September 7 between youth belonging to the Christian Berom tribe and Muslim Hausa youth.

Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo called out the army on September 8 and a dusk to dawn curfew was imposed. On September 9, police sealed the borders of Plateau state, prohibiting travel to and from the region. In spite of the curfew and the army and police presence, clashes between the rival groups have continued. The violence is reported to have escalated again following last week's terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

Press reports state that more than 500 people having been killed in a week of confrontations; however, officials are reluctant to confirm such a figure. On Monday September 10, Phillip Macham, a Red Cross official, said "165 bodies have been deposited at various hospitals in Jos," he added that 900 people had been injured.

Eyewitnesses report seeing bodies in the streets, some apparently killed in clashes with the military. Roadblocks have been set up and drivers killed if they happen to be from the wrong ethnic group. Mobs armed with machetes have also been responsible for deaths.

According to one version, the immediate spark was reported to be an incident in which a woman tried to cross through a street barrier where Muslim men had gathered to pray. An alternative explanation being given is that Muslim youth torched a church.

Communal tensions in the city have been growing since the appointment of a Muslim politician, Alhaji Mohammed Muktar, to a low-level government post as chairman of a state poverty alleviation committee. The other contender for the post was a Christian.

Muktar's appointment exacerbated rivalry between the Berom, the dominant group and the Jasawa, a Hausa group, who have recently moved into the area and are vying for political influence.

In the last year, Christians leaving the majority Muslim state of Kaduna have come into Jos to escape the prospect of living under Islamic Sharia law, adding to the tension.

Under military rule in Nigeria communal divisions were suppressed, but since the move to civilian rule in 1999 they have increasingly come to the surface.

Communal violence has become the means by which the political elites in the different regions attempt to build up a power base for themselves and attempt to undercut a nationwide response among Nigeria's working people and poor masses to government-backed IMF measures that have caused widespread impoverishment.

Nigeria contains a complex mixture of ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. British colonialism fomented these divisions to maintain its rule. In the northern area, the mainly Muslim Hausa and Fulani peoples were the recruiting ground for the military elite, a situation that continues to this day. Twelve of the northern states have now defied the federal constitution and introduced strict Islamic Sharia law. Punishments inflicted include the severing of hands for theft, public whipping for adultery and stoning to death for rape and murder. Protests from minority Christians resulted in clashes in Kaduna state last year, leaving 2,000 dead.

In the mainly Christian south there has also been a growth of tribalist groupings. The Oodua Peoples' Congress, based in Lagos and the south west, promotes the separation of the Yoruba tribal grouping. It is said to have been responsible for the deaths of about 1,000 people in ethnic violence against Muslim northerners. There have also been a number of ethnic clashes in the

highly populated oil producing Delta region. In total, nearly 7,000 people have died in communal conflicts since 1999.

In a country that is gripped by double-digit inflation, the latest round of economic austerity measures will fuel more communal tensions, as the 36 regional state governments compete for resources. For its part, the central government is pressing ahead with an IMF structural adjustment programme, forcing through privatisations and further destroying the social conditions of the population.

A recent IMF report called on Nigeria to maintain the momentum of its privatisation programme. It criticised the government for giving way to pressure, particularly the “massive protests” last year, when strikes took place over the level of the official minimum wage. In response to pressure from workers, the government was forced to substantially increase public service wages in May 2000. After widespread protests it also withdrew its decision to remove the petroleum subsidy and deregulate the downstream petroleum sectors.

The IMF condemned the sharp increase in government spending, which rose to 43 percent of GDP in 2000, and the plans to further increase it to 53 percent of GDP in the 2001 budget. The regime in Abuja has been able to fund these increases in public spending because of the rise in oil prices in 2000, but the IMF warned that this would not be possible in subsequent years. It criticised Nigeria’s plans to reduce poverty as too ambitious and called for “a sharp reduction in spending by state and local governments” and for “vigorous efforts to reduce the wage bill.”

The IMF and the World Bank are demanding the more rapid privatisation of public enterprises, which account for 50 percent of total GDP, 57 percent of investment, and two-thirds of employment. They are calling for the state-owned power industry to be sold off immediately and for the government to give up any attempt to increase capacity, despite the frequent power cuts that are plaguing the country.

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