

Protest against Afghan bombings sparks ethnic conflict in Nigeria

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Dozens of people were killed and hundreds injured in clashes last weekend between gangs of Muslim and Christian youths in Kano, the main city in northern Nigeria.

Accurate figures of those killed and injured are not available but community leaders put the number dead at over 200. The Nigerian Red Cross said it was “safe and reliable to quote a figure of over 100”. The Nigerian authorities have sought to play down the conflict and official police figures state that only 18 were killed. According to the Red Cross 18,000 people, most of them non-Muslim have been displaced by the fighting and 300 people injured.

The conflict began when a march was called on October 12 by Islamic fundamentalists to protest against the US bombings in Afghanistan. According to press reports about 2,000 youths from an organisation called Muslim Revolutionaries, said to be carrying posters of bin Laden, fought with the police brought in to keep order. Fighting then spread, as rival gangs of youths attacked each other in heavily populated parts of the city.

Dozens of houses, mosques, churches, shops and vehicles were burnt during the rioting that carried on through the night and into the next day. Several Nigerian newspaper and magazine offices were torched. One house that was burnt down belonged to Nigeria’s Foreign Affairs Minister, Alhaji Sule Lamido, who had been singled out by demonstrators as a supporter of US policy.

Troops with tanks and armoured cars were brought in to patrol the affected areas and on the second day, police were ordered to shoot rioters on sight. One community leader told a *Reuters* reporter that he knew of eight people who had been rounded up and shot. Another witness reported a youth involved in the

rioting having been shot at point blank range.

The majority of the population in Kano are Muslims belonging to the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups, whilst a substantial minority are Christians, many of them traders belonging to the Igbo group. Conflicts were most severe in areas such as Zangon, Brigade and Kurna Asabe, predominantly Muslim areas with a Christian minority, and Sabon Gari, a mainly Christian enclave. Igbo youth in Sabon Gari were reported to be preparing revenge attacks and were being held back by police and military.

Despite the potential for escalating conflict, especially in the Muslim-dominated north, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo continued with his attendance at a UNESCO meeting in Paris. As one of the few African leaders to give complete support to the US government’s “war against terrorism”, he clearly wanted to minimise the potential instability in Nigeria that this could cause. “I don’t worry”, he told reporters, claiming that no more security measures were needed: “Not really. We knew there would be people who would want to express (themselves).” He suggested that there was no connection between the October 12 demonstration and the later rioting: “Friday was a peaceful demonstration but (on) Saturday boys who want to steal and loot took over.”

Obasanjo hoped to show the foreign media that his government is in control. The US administration, his main western backers, also presented the same low-key response. A state department official denied there was any connection between the anti-American Muslim fundamentalist protest and the riots that followed: “They are not connected,” said a spokesman, “Our people on the ground say the demonstration ended and peacefully broke up. They see this as yet another outbreak of sectarian violence.”

In reality the Nigerian regime is organising a security clampdown in preparation for a situation that could easily deteriorate further. According to *Vanguard* newspaper, the Inspector of Police has ordered all police commands in the country “to commence immediately patrols of churches and mosques to forestall demonstrations over the United States of America bombings in Afghanistan.” Heavily armed detachments of mobile police have been put on alert throughout Nigeria to respond to any further protests. Police surveillance units are to be strengthened and plain clothed detectives drafted in to “monitor all Muslim and Christian activities.”

US embassy officials in Nigeria announced that the US were to provide additional security personnel to protect oil installations, saying that there were dangers of a possible terrorist attack on oil facilities. The Nigerian navy has also despatched patrols to defend US-owned oil installations.

Since the beginning of civilian rule in 1999, up to 7,000 people have been killed in Nigeria in ethnic conflicts. By far the majority of these conflicts have been in the northern region between Hausa and Fulani Muslims and Christians. The biggest conflict, in which up to 2,000 were killed, took place in the northern city of Kaduna in May last year.

Twelve of the northern states have now introduced strict Islamic Sharia law, defying the national federal constitution. Since this barbaric legal system was introduced in Zamfara at the beginning of last year, at least one man has had his hand amputated for theft, a woman received a hundred lashes for fornication, despite claiming that she was raped, and in Sokoto a pregnant woman now faces stoning to death for indulging in pre-marital sex.

The leaders of this fundamentalist movement have come to the fore after the end of military rule, as the northern elite has felt its position and sources of income undermined—most military leaders being from a northern Muslim background. They have latched on to Sharia in order to create a climate of fear, particularly amongst Christians. To pretend, like Obasanjo and the US state department spokesman, that these politicians have nothing to do with whipping up and even hiring mobs of rioting youth is nonsense.

Even Obasanjo’s Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Chief Duben Onya, pointed out, “those

negative and discredited politicians who could no longer have access to easy money are causing trouble in the name of religion, using other people’s children whereas their own children are tucked in somewhere enjoying themselves.” Ahmed Rajab, editor of the London based *Africa Analysis*, commented, “The political landscape is changing.” Despite great poverty, there is now also “a substantial number of highly-educated Muslim elites, well-versed in the Koran and able to push forward Sharia to gain political power.”

For their part, Christian and other tribalist elements of the political elite throughout Nigeria are also promoting similar mob violence, as they attempt to build up their own power base. Such tribalism and religious bigotry has been able to find support amidst the worsening poverty levels, high unemployment and lack of educational prospects facing masses of youth. As Obasanjo has applied the IMF austerity measures pushed by his US backers, state welfare measures have declined whilst none of the profits made from increasing oil production have benefited the vast majority of the population.



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