

# Nigeria: Death toll from inter-communal violence mounts

Ann Talbot

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At least 215 are confirmed dead and several thousand injured after six days of rioting between Christians and Muslims in the northern Nigerian city of Kaduna. It is estimated that 12,000 people have been made homeless. Many have fled the city as whole residential areas have been burnt to the ground.

The riots followed mounting tension over the decision to hold the Miss World beauty pageant in Nigeria. The immediate spark was an article in the Nigerian paper *This Day*, which said that the prophet Mohammed would not have objected to the event and would have chosen a wife from among the contestants.

Islamic leaders condemned the article as blasphemous and Muslim youths responded by setting fire to the paper's offices and to churches in Kaduna. Christian gangs retaliated by burning mosques, Muslim owned businesses and houses.

The streets of Kaduna were littered with corpses. According to local witnesses some have been shot by the police and army. One man reported that the security forces broke through the gates of his house and took away his two adult sons. He later found one of them dead on a street corner.

Kaduna is under curfew and it appears that a major security crackdown is underway. The State Security Service (SSS) have arrested *This Day*'s editor Simon Kolawole and Ms Isioma Daniel, the journalist who wrote the article. Nigerian President Obasanjo has condemned the article as irresponsible and insensitive.

Rioting broke out briefly in the Nigerian capital of Abuja, but was immediately put down by riot police, as Muslim gangs tried to attack the plush hotels where the Miss World contestants were staying. The organisers of the beauty pageant were forced to abandon plans to hold the contest in Nigeria and head for London.

President Olusegun Obasanjo's government had been

determined to host the Miss World contest as a means of improving Nigeria's international image and encouraging tourism. But the project immediately ran into opposition from the powerful northern-based political elite.

The northern elite were developed as a military caste by the British colonial rulers. Since independence they have continued to dominate the military and have ruled the country through a succession of military regimes.

Nigeria's military rulers siphoned off vast amounts of the country's oil wealth into foreign bank accounts until Western governments and the oil companies demanded an end to this practice and installed Olusegun Obasanjo as president in the rigged election of 1999.

Obasanjo, a former general, was acceptable to all factions because while he is a Christian from the south of Nigeria he had close ties with the Hausa-Fulani military elite of the northern states.

Since then, however, leading Hausa-Fulani figures have become increasingly restive under his presidency as he has responded to pressure from the West to limit the share of Nigeria's wealth that accrues to the north.

The northern generals who once relied on this source of wealth to maintain their political position have turned to Islam as a means of preserving their power. With unemployment and poverty widespread, youth are whipped up to make Christians and other non-Muslims scapegoats for deteriorating social conditions.

Kaduna has been a divided city since 2,000 people died in inter-communal violence two years ago. The latest riots show every sign of being planned in advance, since they did not take place until the Wednesday after the article appeared in Saturday's paper.

It is possible that the events in Kaduna were the result

of political manoeuvring by other factions as well as the northern elite. A national daily paper like *This Day* is well aware of the political tensions in Nigeria. For it to run an article almost calculated to inflame the situation suggests a possible desire to force a conflict.

For several weeks it has been rumoured that former president Ibrahim Babangida plans to stand against Obasanjo in next year's presidential elections. His candidacy would be a sign that the northern generals intend to take power back into their own hands and could result in wider ethnic and religious clashes, even civil war.

In a recent speech at the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, Babangida attacked Obasanjo for a "failure of public policy" and "a poverty of leadership". He blamed Obasanjo for the growth of "ethno-regional nationalism."

"There is no doubt in my mind," he said, "that multi-ethnicism feeds upon a multi-party system." A multi-party system, Babangida declared, "creates leverage for an intensified multi-ethnic nationalism."

He could not have signalled more clearly his intention of re-imposing a military dictatorship on Nigeria and scrapping even the faint semblance of democratic forms that has existed since 1999.

By provoking riots in the north, the intention may have been to preempt Babangida's announcement that he would challenge Obasanjo for the presidency. It may have been thought that religious violence would discredit him and the other northern generals before the election. The article may in this case be part of a concerted campaign to shift the balance of power in Nigeria to the Yoruba elite of the south.

Elements inside Nigeria and international groups have sought to exploit the horrific sentences imposed under Islamic "Sharia" law in the northern states of Nigeria. Thirty-one year old Amina Lawal is currently under sentence of death by stoning for having a baby outside of marriage. A Sharia court decreed that the barbaric sentence would be carried out once she had weaned her child. It is possible that her sentence may be revoked by a federal court as in a previous case, but amputations and beatings are routinely carried out under Sharia law.

The imposition of Islamic law is one of the ways in which the military elite has attempted to keep their hold over their northern power base, where the majority of

the population is Muslim. Its savage punishments are used to suppress all progressive ideas, instil terror and give the false impression that social order can be maintained as growing poverty produces crime and family disintegration.

In its backwardness Sharia law reflects the attitudes of a distant historical past. It has been revived in modern Nigeria for very definite political purposes of the most reactionary character. But it has also become a pretext for the intervention of right-wing Christian organisations, whose attitude to women is no more enlightened than that of Muslim fundamentalists.

One such group is Opus Dei, the secretive Roman Catholic lay organisation, which was associated with Spanish fascist leader General Franco. It has been active in organising demonstrations in Italy against Sharia sentences. It is said to be building up a base at Lagos Business School and the Institute for Industrial Technology. Both institutions are backed by big business sponsors.

The activities of Opus Dei in Africa are financed by the European Union. Its presence is a response to the immense importance of Nigerian oil reserves and the rivalry between the different imperialist powers to claim a share. While the US has the greatest military strength, older and weaker European imperialist powers may fall back upon political and ideological forms of leverage to gain influence in this strategically vital region.



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