Nigerian government uses terror bombing to justify clampdown

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The Nigerian government of President Goodluck Jonathan is using a spate of terrorist bombings to justify measures aimed at countering the developing social threat to his rule.

Last Friday a series of coordinated bombings were carried out in Kano and other cities in the north. Government buildings, police buildings, passport offices and immigration centres were targeted. The regime seized on the bombings, which claimed 200 lives, to impose a military crackdown. A dusk-to-dawn curfew has been imposed in Kano, and other northern states are under emergency law.

The Islamic fundamentalist sect Boko Haram reportedly claimed responsibility for the attacks, though many question whether they are the true authors and precisely who the group's "spokesman" is.

Boko Haram, whose name is translated as "Western education is forbidden", was founded in 2002. It feeds on deep-seated grievances in the predominantly Muslim north, which suffers discrimination and high levels of poverty. But it is a nebulous organisation, and there is no way of proving its actual size or the scale of its activities.

The Kano bombings took place just four days after the ending of a general strike involving millions of workers against Jonathan's elimination of fuel subsidies. Boko Haram and other Islamist tendencies share with the Jonathan's regime a deep hostility to a mass movement in which class questions came to the fore and cut across efforts on both sides to divide the working class along religious lines, Muslims against Christians. However, the instigation of terrorist acts by provocateurs cannot be ruled out.

The Jonathan regime has stoked up sectarian tensions since coming to office last year, in order to divert attention from the widening gulf between the Nigerian super-rich and millions who live in deep poverty. It claimed the general strike was being infiltrated by Boko Haram, claiming that the nation faced a worse threat from the group than the civil war of the 1960s that cost over a million lives.

Jean Herskovitz, a professor of history at the State University of New York, points out in the *New York Times* that Boko Haram "has evolved into a franchise that includes criminal groups claiming its identity," including "Southern Nigerians—not northern Muslims," who run three of four identified criminal syndicates. "Last week, the security services arrested a Christian southerner wearing northern Muslim garb as he set fire to a church in the Niger Delta. In Nigeria, religious terrorism is not always what it seems."

The general strike was the culmination of more than two weeks of protests against the government's decision to remove fuel subsidies that had developed into the largest social movement in Nigeria's history. Immediately prior to the strike and as it began, bombings attributed to Boko Haram were also carried out in the north.

Kano was the scene of major protests and was one of the most militant areas during the strike. On January 16, the day the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) called off the strike, workers in Kano held a demonstration in defiance of the union bureaucracy's orders.

The unions are citing the terror bombings as a pretext to line up behind the People's Democratic Party government. On Monday NLC President Abduwahed Omar called for "the federal government to urgently overhaul the country's security and intelligence community, as well as provide contemporary equipment and manpower that will enable the various agencies to improve their competence in handling

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security challenges, especially as terrorism seems to have taken root in Nigeria."

Their move was backed by the union's international parent. On Tuesday, International Trade Union Confederation General Secretary Sharan Burrow issued a press release declaring, "It is time for the Nigerian authorities to take all necessary measures to stop the violence and to address democratically the socioeconomic challenges needed."

The demand to restore the fuel subsidy became the focus for mass opposition to the International Monetary Fund/World Bank-inspired policies imposed by Jonathan. Having betrayed the strike, the central strategy of the unions is the continued suppression of the class struggle.

The clampdown demanded by the unions is already under way. On Tuesday, under Operation Restore Order, security agents of the Joint Task Force killed four alleged members of Boko Haram in Maiduguri. The Associated Press reported that early Tuesday morning Nigerian government troops killed a man and a pregnant woman "in an assault on a neighbourhood" in Kano. A relative of the dead man stated that the deceased had nothing to do with Boko Haram and was a retired employee of the education ministry.

The suppression of the working class and the launching of a "war on terror" are fully supported by the Obama administration, which is seeking to strengthen its own hold over a country possessing vast oil and gas reserves. Some 8 percent of US oil imports come from Nigeria, which has the largest proven oil reserves in Africa after Libya. Washington has tried to link Boko Haram to Al Qaeda to provide a pretext for armed intervention. Nigerian troops are already being provided with counterterror training, arms and "advisers" by the Pentagon.

On Monday officials from the Nigerian government and the Obama administration, including military and intelligence officials, met for two days of discussion in the capital, Abuja. The US delegation was led by US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs William Fitzgerald.

A report in the *Nation* newspaper stated that after a formal opening the meeting went into closed session. Fitzgerald reportedly spoke on "Political Responses to Security Problems," while US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Defence Joseph McMillan delivered a paper on "Developing Effective and Sustainable Counter-Terrorism Capacity."

This is part of an expanding intervention by US imperialism in Africa. The United States African Command (AFRICOM) operates in Eritrea and Uganda and played a leading role in the Libyan military operation until it was transferred to NATO. In 2008 the United States Army War College based in Carlisle, Pennsylvania conducted a series of "war game" scenarios in preparation for the Pentagon's expansion of AFRICOM.

One of the war games reportedly included a military exercise to gauge how AFRICOM would respond to a situation in which Nigeria had descended into civil war, and various rebel factions were seeking control over the Niger Delta oilfields. On the basis that a US-friendly coup failed to take place, the war game envisaged that up to 20,000 US troops would be needed to seize the oilfields.

At a February 18, 2008 AFRICOM conference, "Transforming National Security: AFRICOM —an Emerging Command", Vice Admiral Robert T. Moeller stated that the guiding principle of AFRICOM was to protect "the free flow of natural resources from Africa to the global market."

The following month, at a House Armed Services Committee press conference, AFRICOM Commander General William Ward declared that due to the US's increasing reliance on imports of African oil, the "number one theatre-wide goal" would be combating terrorism.

Last November, a subcommittee of the House Committee on Homeland Security issued a report, "Boko Haram: Emerging Threat to the U.S. Homeland."

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