Terror bombing kills 118 in Jos, Nigeria

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Two back-to-back bomb blasts killed 118 people and wounded at least 45 in the crowded Terminus Market district, near a major railway terminal in the central Nigerian city of Jos yesterday. According to local reports, the first bomb exploded at 3:28 p.m. and the second 14 minutes later.

The twin bombings were designed to maximise the death toll from the atrocity, with the second blast striking rescuers rushing to aid the victims of the first blast. The victims were largely hawkers and working people shopping in a predominantly Christian area of Jos, which is in Nigeria's "Middle Belt"—the region where the primarily Muslim north of Nigeria adjoins the majority-Christian south.

"It's a business area, but it's for the very poor," Shamaki Gad Peter, an activist of the Nigeria Reconciliation and Stability Program, told the *New York Times*. "There are women selling tomatoes. It's not where you have the rich and mighty people doing their shopping ... I saw women carried away in wheelbarrows."

Bala Mohammed, a resident who was close by when the first bomb detonated, told the *Guardian*: "People started running to help the wounded, and 10 minutes later the second one went off. It took off the roof of the market building. Many were trapped inside. It was a terrible scene."

The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) confirmed the figure of 118 dead but local officials said they expected the death toll to rise because the marketplace was still racked by fires. "Firemen are still trying to put them out. We believe we will find more bodies," regional coordinator Mohammed Abdulsalam told the Associated Press.

Police officials told Jos residents to stay away from the bombing site. "Men of our anti-bomb unit will comb the market before it is declared safe for business activities to continue," Commissioner of Police Chris Olakpe said at a press conference.

The bombing inflamed sectarian tensions between Christians and Muslims in the city. While religious leaders of both faiths called for calm, Christian youth reportedly set up checkpoints to search vehicles. In one neighborhood, Christian men reportedly armed themselves with clubs and marched on Muslim areas of the city, but were stopped by police. Ahmed Sittu, a Muslim inhabitant of Jos, said: "They were very angry, and innocent people would have been their victims."

No organisation claimed responsibility for the bombing. However, the blasts came as the United States and the European powers are deploying troops, aircraft and intelligence agents into Nigeria in an escalating intervention, targeting the Islamist Boko Haram militia, which is active in northeast Nigeria, after it kidnapped 276 schoolgirls from the village of Chibok in April.

The troop deployments by the major powers were sanctioned by the Nigerian government of President Goodluck Jonathan after it came under intense pressure and criticism over the fate of the kidnapped girls. This included a campaign on Twitter, #BringOurGirlsBack, championed by US First Lady Michelle Obama and celebrities such as Angelina Jolie. The issue has been successfully leveraged by the White House to step up US military operations in Nigeria, which has the world's 11th largest untapped reserves of oil and is Africa's largest economy, as part of a broader extension of US interventions on the continent.

Yesterday, Jonathan issued a statement declaring that "the government remains fully committed to winning the war against terror... This administration will not be cowed by the atrocities of enemies of human progress and civilization."

The international campaign to demonise Boko Haram as the latest example of terrorism that must be confronted—and provide the pretext for the entry of US

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and other foreign military forces into Nigeria—studiously ignores the underlying social and political issues.

Northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim and the most deprived region of the country. Boko Haram established itself as a political force primarily through populist denunciations of social inequality and police brutality against marginalised youth, rather than through religious appeals. It launched an armed insurgency in 2009 after coming under intense state repression during which its founder, Mohammed Yusuf, was killed. Human Rights Watch alleged that Yusuf's death was an extrajudicial killing carried out by police while he was in custody.

In 2012, following the bombing of police stations and government buildings by the group in the northern city of Kano, Nigerian human rights activist Damian Ugwu told Voice of America: "I see Boko Haram as the end result of manifestation of bad policies and impunity in Nigeria. For me it is a society where the wealth of the country is being cornered by the elite who do not care what happens to the rest of the country. You are bound to see a lot of people who are angry with the system."

Nigerian security forces have conducted a brutal and indiscriminate campaign to suppress the insurgency. In October 2013, Amnesty International accused the Nigerian Army of murdering at least 950 people who were detained on allegations that they were connected with Boko Haram in just the first six months of the year. A Nigerian army officer told Amnesty: "Hundreds have been killed in detention either by shooting them or by suffocation … There are times when people are brought out on a daily basis and killed. About five people, on average, are killed nearly on a daily basis."

Boko Haram has claimed responsibility for a number of attacks on government forces, as well as atrocities committed against Christian and foreign civilians. State repression has led to the escalation of violence. More than 2,000 people have been killed in bombings and fighting in Nigeria this year alone, compared to 3,600 for the entire period from 2010 to 2013.

In November 2013, the Obama administration formally classified Boko Haram as a "terrorist organization," opening the way for US military action against it and greater assistance to the Nigerian military. To further justify operations in Nigeria, State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki stated at a May 20 press conference that while Boko Haram was not an "affiliate" of Al Qaeda, "there is connection in the sense that there's evidence in the past of assistance and funding."

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