

Nigeria: Bishop warns of threat of genocide against Christians

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Christians peacefully demonstrating in May against violence in Mbalom, Benue State © ACN

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Source: ACN

A bishop in Nigeria has warned of the threat of genocide against Christians in the country's Middle Belt region, describing an upsurge of violence by militant Fulani herdsman as "ethnic cleansing".

Bishop William Avenya of Gboko told Aid to the Church in Need, the Catholic charity for persecuted Christians, of growing fears amid reports that, so far this year, 492 people have died in his state of Benue, which has a Christian-majority population.

In an appeal to the international community, he told ACN: "Don't wait for the genocide to happen before intervening... Please don't make the same mistake as was made with the genocide in Rwanda. It happened beneath our noses, but no one stopped it. And we know well how that ended."

Local reports on Wednesday, 27th June, said extremists "slaughtered more than 200 people" in 10 mainly Christian communities near the city of Jos, although police said there were only 86 fatalities.

In his ACN interview, Bishop Avenya went on to say of the militant Fulani: "They are criminals and terrorists, but they do not do the same things in the majority Muslim areas. We are convinced that what is happening is an ethnic cleansing of Christians."

His comments come after other senior Church figures from the region described the militant Fulani campaign as a "clear agenda of Islamising the Nigerian Middle Belt".

They include two other prelates from Benue State - Bishop Peter Adoboh of Katsina-Ala, Bishop Wilfred Anagbe of Makurdi - and Bishop Matthew Audu of Lafia, from nearby Nassarawa state.

According to research by Christian persecution charity Open Doors, between May 2016 and September 2017, as many as 725 people died in violence in the Middle Belt's southern Kaduna region - 98 percent of them Christians.

Bishop Avenya described Nigeria-wide peace demonstrations on 22nd May and called on the West to save lives in the country, saying: "Our faithful are being murdered or forced to live as refugees as a result of the violence.

"And the West continues to view the matter of the Fulani as merely an internal problem."

His comments come after the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) issued a statement calling on President Muhammadu Buhari to consider resigning for alleged inaction in response to what the CBCN called "the killing fields and mass graveyard that our country has become".

Bishop Avenya also spoke of the supply of weaponry now used by militant Fulani. He said: "At one time these pastoralists were armed only with sticks. But now they are armed with AK-47 rifles - expensive weapons that they could not possibly afford. So who is supplying them?"

He added: "And besides, in these areas there are checkpoints every two kilometres. Is it possible that armed men followed by their flocks of cattle could have somehow become invisible?"

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's 2018 report found that "herder-farmer conflicts and ethnoreligious tensions continued to rise... [with] increased reports of concerns of an ethnic cleansing campaign against Christian communities".

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