

UN warns sectarian attacks in Nigeria could amount to crimes against humanity

By: U.N. News Centre

22 June 2012

The United Nations human rights office today condemned the repeated attacks on churches in Nigeria by the extremist Islamist group Boko Haram, and warned that acts against civilians, including on grounds such as religion or ethnicity, could amount to crimes against humanity.

It is estimated that over 100 people have been killed when several churches were attacked by Boko Haram in Kaduna state, in the country's centre, last Sunday and in its aftermath, according to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Boko Haram is the same group that claimed responsibility for the bombing last year of the UN offices in the Nigerian capital, Abuja.

Some 30 people were killed in the initial attacks on Sunday and subsequent retaliation by Christian youths who set up checkpoints. The rest were reportedly killed in clashes between the security forces and Muslims protesting at the deadly retaliatory acts by the Christians, and most recently in clashes between the security forces and alleged insurgents in the Damaturu area.

"We condemn the repeated attacks by Boko Haram on places of worship and on religious freedom, as well as its blatant attempts to stir sectarian tensions and violence between two communities that have lived together peacefully for so long," OHCHR's spokesperson in Geneva, Rupert Colville, told reporters.

Mr. Colville added that members of Boko Haram and other groups and entities, if judged to have committed widespread or systematic attacks against a civilian population – including on grounds such as religion or ethnicity – are likely to be found guilty of crimes against humanity.

"Deliberate acts leading to population 'cleansing' on grounds of religion or ethnicity would also amount to a crime against humanity," he noted.

OHCHR urged the authorities to take measures to curb inflammatory or hate speech and to work with all stakeholders including civil society and religious leaders to help deal with this deadly threat.

It also encouraged Muslim and Christian leaders to redouble their efforts to contain such extremely dangerous manifestations of religious intolerance and inter-communal violence.

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