

## **Poverty and injustice drive Nigeria's sectarian violence -report**

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7/11/2012

PARIS (Reuters) - Poverty, inequality and injustice are threatening to trigger a broad sectarian conflict in Nigeria, an international Christian-Muslim task force said on Wednesday.

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Clashes between Nigerian Christians and Muslims have already killed hundreds of people this year alone. But although the violence is the worst between members of the two faiths since the Bosnian war of 1992-1995, the root causes go far beyond religion, the group's report said.

Corruption, mismanagement, land disputes and the lack of aid for victims or punishment for troublemakers have all fuelled tensions, especially in Nigeria's "Middle Belt", where the mostly Muslim north meets the largely Christian south, it said.

Attacks by radical Islamist groups such as Boko Haram that exploit these secular issues and revenge killings by Christian and Muslim gangs have reinforced the religious aspect of the violence.

"There is a possibility that the current tension and conflict might become subsumed by its religious dimension (especially along geographical 'religious fault-lines')," the report said, warning that blaming only religion for the strife would make that incomplete view "a self-fulfilling prediction".

The 12-member joint delegation was led by World Council of Churches (WCC) General Secretary Olav Fyske Tveit of Norway and Jordanian Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, chairman of the board of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought.

The report identified dozens of separate problems whose resolution could contribute to overall peace.

The wealth gap between the oil-producing states in the south and the resource-poor north was a leading factor in regional tensions, as were land disputes such as the lack of recognized grazing land for nomadic Fulani cattle herders.

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Indigenous inhabitants in many Nigerian states enjoy more legal rights than "settlers," who have no access to free healthcare, education, land and jobs even though some of them moved into those areas generations ago.

"It is an enormous problem that needs to be solved or resolved at the federal and constitution levels, perhaps with a constitutional clarification or amendment," the report said.

It also said tensions arose because Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian southerner, served out the presidential term of northern Muslim Umaru Yar'Adua after the latter's death in 2010, then won election in 2011. Some Northerners say this broke a power-sharing agreement between north and south.

But the report did say that religion itself had played a part in fuelling the violence.

"In Nigeria, three things are intertwined - religion, politics and ethnicity - and the three are beclouded with corruption, poverty and insecurity," the report quoted former justice minister Prince Bola Ajibola, one of several Nigerian officials who accompanied the delegation, as saying.

Religious leaders on both sides have publicly condoned the violence, it said, and well-funded missionaries for both Islam and Christianity have also fanned tensions.

The Geneva-based WCC and the Jordanian institute announced they would jointly publish books for Nigerian schools explaining the theology of peace in both religions and draw up a manifesto on interfaith cooperation for Nigerians to sign.

They also said they would seek partners to launch a neutral center to collect accurate information on the conflict to help find a settlement.

The joint delegation, which met government officials and faith leaders in the strife-torn Kaduna and Plateau states and in Abuja from May 22 to 25, said it wanted to show how Muslims and Christians could work together to foster peace.

"The crisis in Nigeria must no longer be seen as a localized issue," the report said in its conclusion.

(Editing by Kevin Liffey)

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