

Death Toll in Nigeria Climbs Past 200 as Violence Spreads

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LAGOS, Nigeria, Nov. 24 -- The death toll from riots sparked by Muslim opposition to hosting of the Miss World pageant rose to more than 200, officials said today, as violence continued to spread across the country.

Despite the decision of the Miss World organizers to move the pageant to London, rioting continued in the northern city of Kaduna, where Muslim anger erupted last Wednesday when a local newspaper columnist suggested that the prophet Muhammad might have taken one of the contestants as a wife.

Muslim militants burned the northern regional office of the newspaper, ThisDay, and then attacked Christians and churches. Kaduna's Christian population has launched reprisal attacks against Muslim targets, pushing up the death toll, according to hospital officials and the local Red Cross.

"We have received reports from field operatives involved in retrieving corpses from the streets indicating more than 200 people have so far died," said Johnson Michika, an official at the city's main hospital.

The president of the Nigerian Red Cross, Emmanuel Ijewere, said his organization had counted 215 dead by Saturday night.

The violence has since reached Nigeria's capital, Abuja. There were no immediate reports of casualties there, the Associated Press reported.

Religious violence has rocked this country of 130 million, Africa's most populous, in the past three years. The fighting has claimed more than 10,000 lives and threatened the fragile unity of a country that is divided almost equally between Muslims and non-Muslims.