News



Men march along a truck Jan. 11 carrying the coffins of people killed by Fulani herdsmen in Makurdi, Nigeria. With at least 80 people killed since the start of the year in conflict over fertile land in Nigeria, the nation's bishops condemned what they call brutal massacres of innocent people. (CNS/Afolabi Sotunde, Reuters)

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With at least 80 people killed since the start of the year in conflict over fertile land in Nigeria, the nation's bishops condemned what they call brutal massacres of innocent people.

"Herdsmen may be under pressure to save their livestock and economy, but this is never to be done at the expense of other peoples' lives or livelihoods," the Nigerian bishops' conference said in a Jan. 16 statement.

The "mass slaughter of unarmed citizens by armed herdsmen in some communities in Benue, Adamawa, Kaduna and Taraba states has caused national shock, grief and outcry," the bishops said.

Benue, in north-central Nigeria, is the state worst hit in the latest fights over land. Often fighting is between the mostly Muslim semi-nomadic herdsmen and predominantly Christian farmers.

Thousands of herdsmen have moved southward to flee spreading desertification in the North, putting pressure on dwindling fertile land amid rapid population growth. The herdsmen, mainly from the Fulani ethnic group, strongly oppose new anti-grazing legislation that was signed into law by the Benue state government in November.

Nigeria "appears to be under siege from many forces," the bishops said.

"Repeatedly, innocent citizens in different communities across the nation are brutally attacked, and their sources of livelihood mindlessly destroyed," they said, noting that "places of worship, schools, hospitals and business enterprises are torched and turned to ashes."

While "thanking God and the federal government for the successes so far recorded in the fight against Boko Haram terrorists in the northeast, we are appalled by the

repeated occurrence of other ugly incidents that are tearing communities apart," the bishops said.

They urged the government to protect its citizens against "marauding herdsmen" and warned that if people resort to vigilantism in self-defense, there could be a "complete breakdown of law and order in the country."

Farmers and herdsmen "have a lot to contribute to the socio-economic prosperity of our nation," they said, noting that "a more enduring strategy must be worked out for their peaceful co-existence and mutual respect.''

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Another Jan. 16 statement, signed by Archbishop Gabriel 'Leke Abegunrin of Ibadan on behalf of five dioceses, criticized Nigeria's government for doing little to tackle "the menace of the killer herdsmen" and called for arrests and prosecutions.

In a Jan. 15 statement, several other bishops called on the government "to live up to the fundamental and constitutional responsibility of protection of human lives and property."