News



The headquarters of the Nigerian Catholic bishops' conference in Abuja (Chinedu Asadu)

by Chinedu Asadu

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When Fr. John Gbakaan was leaving Nigeria's Benue state after visiting his mother there last month, it is hard to imagine he knew he was bidding her farewell for the

last time.

On Jan. 15, barely 24 hours after the priest left home along with his brother, they were attacked at night along a notorious highway in Niger state, about two hours from St. Anthony's Parish where Gbakaan worked. The attackers reportedly hacked the priest to death, tied his body to a tree in a nearby bush and left with his brother.

Fr. Stephen Akagwu, who Gbakaan worked under when he was first ordained a deacon, described an unrelenting sadness at hearing that his friend of five years was gone.

"I felt so bad when I heard the news of his death because of how close we were," Akagwu told NCR. "We ate together, we worked together, we went to villages together and he helped me so much before he was ordained a priest."

While locals are still reeling from the shock of the priest's murder, the incident is just the latest in what has become a devastating reality: Catholic clerics increasingly are victims of violent attacks across Nigeria.

Lagos Archbishop Alfred Martins told NCR that there has never been a worse time for the church in the country.

Fr. John Gbakaan (Provided photo)

Fr. John Gbakaan (Provided photo)

"I do not recall any time that we have had so many people, so many clergymen been kidnapped and being killed than we have now," said Martins. "To that extent, you can say that this is the worst period in Nigeria when clergymen are being attacked; being kidnapped and killed."

Although the Catholic secretariat of Nigeria, the church's administrative body in the country, told NCR it does not have official records of the number of bishops, priests and sisters who have either been abducted or killed in recent months, its secretary general said there appears to be a clear anti-clergy bias.

"Very often, those kidnapped are Catholic priests," said Fr. Zacharia Samjumi. "Whenever you hear of a kidnapping, it is a Catholic priest involved. If bishops are being kidnapped, then who is safe in this country? It is a very sad situation, and we

have been crying [about it], but nobody is listening."

In the month leading up to Gbakaan's death, two other clerics were also kidnapped — and later released — in another part of the country. Auxiliary Bishop Moses Chikwe of the Owerri Archdiocese was abducted and stripped of his clerical regalia on Dec. 27 in southeast Nigeria, just days after Fr. Valentine Oluchukwu Ezeagu of the Sons of Mary Mother of Mercy was kidnapped by armed men and later released.

"Everybody was in shock when the auxiliary bishop was kidnapped," said Samjumi. "It was not as though they didn't know; they knew very well that this is a Roman Catholic bishop; they removed his clothes and dumped them by the cathedral."

Nigeria has continued to battle growing security challenges under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration, with the Boko Haram insurgent group and bandits attacking residents in the north while militants and kidnapping groups continue to attack residents in the south.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, more than 9,000 Nigerians were killed as a result of insecurity in 2020, with many of that number coming from the northeast where the war against Boko Haram has been ongoing for a decade.

Fr. Zacharia Samjumi, secretary general of the Nigerian bishops' conference (Provided photo)

Pilsen Via Crucis, Good Friday, March 30, 2018, Chicago (YouTube/juan ortiz)

In December, the Trump administration designated Nigeria and nine other nations including China and Iran as "countries of concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for "engaging systematic, ongoing, egregious religious freedom violations."

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom later said in a recent situation report that "non-state actors have been responsible for abductions and executions of individuals based on their religious affiliation, as well as attacks on houses of worship and religious ceremonies."

Although spokespersons for the Nigerian presidency and the Nigerian Police Force did not respond to inquiries from NCR, the government has in the past denied enabling attacks on religious organizations including the Catholic Church.

Lai Mohammed, a government spokesperson, told The Nation newspaper Dec. 8 that the administration rejects the Trump administration's designation, arguing that "Nigeria does not engage in religious freedom violation nor does it have a policy of religious persecution."

Mohammed also claimed that "victims of insecurity and terrorism in the country are adherents of Christianity, Islam and other religions," but not many would agree with him.

Schoenstatt Fr. Ugochukwu Ugwoke told NCR that he believes Catholic priests are the target of attacks, which is why he no longer wears a clerical outfit while traveling.

"Now, I wear ordinary clothes and go out, and if I find anything strange on the road, I become afraid of my life," said Ugwoke. "It is as though the country is a slaughterhouse because no place is safe."

Martins, who has led the Lagos Archdiocese since 2012, said he was "particularly scandalized" about how Chikwe was kidnapped.

"These days when the craze for material wealth has overridden every sense of decency, it is not surprising that you have this loss of the sense of the sacred," he told NCR, calling for a "reorientation of values, from the level of the family to the school and the church."

Throughout Nigeria, there are growing concerns about how Catholics can remain steadfast during such a threatening time.

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Fr. Donatus Ajibo of the Nsukka Diocese said that while the growing attacks must be addressed, "a Christian and a Catholic should not be demoralized."

"Jesus made it very clear when he was teaching us about blessedness, that blessed are those who are persecuted for their righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of God," said Ajibo. "So, if we are persecuted, we should be happy about it, and not be demoralized, especially when it is because of Christ."

About what must be done, Martins told NCR that while the Catholic clergy will continue to remind the government of its responsibility to protect peoples' lives, the lay faithful must also do so.

"The more people are talking about the issue, the more those in government will be able to know that this is not just the ranting of clergymen," said Martins.

The Maria Assumpta Cathedral in Owerri, Nigeria, where the clerical regalia of Auxiliary Bisho

The Maria Assumpta Cathedral in Owerri, Nigeria, where the clerical regalia of Auxiliary Bishop Moses Chikwe was found dumped outside the building (Chinedu Asadu)

[Chinedu Asadu is a Nigerian journalist working as a staff writer with The Cable, the country's independent online newspaper.]