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A Black man wearing a blue shirt speaks into a microphone with many men standing behind h

Gov. Caleb Mutfwang of Nigeria's Plateau state is pictured Dec. 27, 2023, visiting communities affected by the Dec. 23-28 killings. He declared a week of mourning Jan. 1-8 to honor the deaths of at least 200 Christians killed during Christmas by Fulani herders in the West African country. (OSV News photo/X (formerly Twitter) account of Caleb Mutfwang)



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Gov. Caleb Mutfwang of Nigeria's Plateau state declared a week of mourning Jan. 1-8 to honor the deaths of at least 200 Christians killed over Christmas by Fulani Muslim herders, targeting Christians in the country. Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah of Sokoto, Nigeria, said the attackers are "children of darkness" and come "from the deepest pit of hell."

The Dec. 23-28 killings also have led to thousands of people being forced to flee their homes.

As many as 80 villages in the Plateau state were attacked, Christian aid group Release International reported Dec. 30. Bodies continue to be discovered, and attacks are expected to continue, the aid group said.

"I urge all citizens to use these days for intense prayers to seek the intervention of the almighty God in defending our territories against wicked men that have risen

against us," Mutfwang said in a video statement released Jan. 2.

The local leader asked that Friday Muslim prayers Jan. 5 and Sunday Masses Jan. 7 be dedicated "as special prayer days for lasting peace to return to the Plateau [region]," he said.

In a three-page New Year's message, called "Blood and crucifixion on the Plateau," a copy of which OSV News obtained, Kukah strongly condemned the killers as "sons of Satan."

"Those invisible men came to the Plateau again, bearing their gifts of death and destruction," he said, adding that Fulani herders "came from the deepest pit of hell, the habitat of the devils that they are."

Calling the killers "children of darkness," he said they snatched "the light of the joy of Christmas from thousands of people on the Plateau."

"They imagined they would ignite an orgy of blood, seduce the ordinary peace-loving people of the Plateau and set them on a mission of mindless murder of fellow citizens in the name of retaliation," he said.

Kukah said he was appalled by the violence and killings in the northern states of Nigeria and blamed the country's government and security agencies for failing to protect the citizens.

"Over the years, these murderers have left their footprints of blood and tears across the length and breadth of the entire northern states, indiscriminately wrecking destruction across large swaths of land and communities," Kukah said. "In all this, the Nigerian state and its security agencies are blindsided."

He added that "funerals" and "coffins" are now part of "our landscape."

He voiced the hopelessness and despair of Nigerians, who he said are losing faith in their government and their religious leaders.

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"While we religious leaders have continued to use our moral authority to encourage our people not to take the laws into their hands, we risk being swept away by the

anger and frustration of our people," he said, adding that Nigeria's "cups of sorrow" are "overflowing."

"We have cried enough tears. We may pretend that we are not at war, but truly, a war is being waged against the Nigerian state and its people. God forbid, but we could snap anytime, anywhere and for any reason," Kukah wrote.

The semi-nomadic Fulani herders have been attacking Christian and Muslim Hausa farmers for years, claiming that farmers are taking over grazing lands crucial to their survival, but Christian groups reject that claim as they appeal for protection from the group that is radicalized as thousands have been killed in recent years.

Nigeria has continued to lead with regard to Christian persecution. According to the Vatican's latest statistics, four of the nine missionaries killed in Africa in 2023 were recorded in Nigeria. The killers "do not respect the boundaries of religion, region or ethnicity," Kukah said.

Open Doors reported that 90% of the more than 5,600 Christians killed for their faith last year were from Nigeria, with the total number of Christians killed in 2023 up 80% from five years ago.

The latest annual report of Aid to the Church in Need, a pontifical foundation dedicated to serving Christians around the world, noted that more than 7,600 Nigerian Christians were killed between January 2021 and June 2022.

Nigeria's leading human rights advocacy group, Intersociety, observed the latest killings with "deepest shock, dismay and sadness," saying that the Fulani group -- called jihadist" by Intersociety -- "have continued unchecked to slaughter, abduct and disappear thousands of defenseless Nigerians."

The group said that since the beginning of January 2023, 3,500 Christians were killed by the extremist group.

In his statement, Kukah asked: "Who are these killers? Where are they coming from? Who is sponsoring them?"

"Are we condemned to live with this and hand this broken nation to our children? Should we all just become inoculated and sedated to make all this bearable?" he said in his New Year's appeal.

He noted that "for us as Christians," however, "in the cross, there is salvation."

"May this new year begin the healing of our dear nation," Kukah said.