News



Worshippers pray during Sunday Mass at the cathedral in Kaya, Burkina Faso, May 16, 2019. The majority of Christians in Burkina Faso are now shying away from Sunday services and instead praying at home after a series of deadly attacks by Islamist militants targeted churches and killed scores of worshippers. (OSV News/Anne Mimault, Reuters)

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The majority of Christians in Burkina Faso are now shying away from Sunday services and instead praying at home after a series of deadly attacks by Islamist militants targeted churches and killed scores of worshippers.

The latest attack by insurgents on a Catholic church in the northeastern part of the country on Feb. 25 left at least 15 people dead. Local church officials told OSV News that gunmen on motorcycles suspected to be Islamist militants raided the church during Sunday worship in Essakane village, close to the border with Mali, indiscriminately shooting at worshippers, including little children on their parents' laps.

"People are devastated and are … avoiding Sunday Mass for fear of further attacks," said Father Jean-Pierre Sawadogo, vicar general of the Diocese of Dori, where the attack took place.

"The church is under attack, and we ask for your prayers during this difficult time and prayers for those who died and were wounded during the recent attack," he told OSV News.

The vicar general noted that most Christians in his diocese are "shaken" by the recent terrorist attack on a Catholic church. "It's a sad situation, and it's going to affect our pastoral activities as people continue to stay away from places of worship," he said.

The West African nation of 21 million people has experienced civil war between the government and Islamist rebels since 2015. The recent report by Human Rights Watch underlined that non-state armed groups control up to 50% of the country's territory, and the conflict has led to the death of thousands of people and displaced over 2 million people.

"Conflict-related violence resulted in the deaths of nearly 7,600 people in over 2,000 incidents in 2023 alone," the report said.

Since 2021, jihadists have increasingly targeted Christians in villages, churches and workplaces -- with a target of killing them. Islamist militants also have destroyed churches and warned Christians not to publicly worship. In 2024, Open Doors ranked Burkina Faso as the 20th worst country to live in as a Christian. The country is 25% Christian and 60% Muslim.

"Christians have been disproportionately impacted by the growing insurgency in the north of the country, with churches and Christian communities singled out in attacks, while Muslims who do not side with the Islamic extremist groups have also suffered greatly," Jo Newhouse, Open Doors spokesperson for the work in sub-Saharan Africa, said after the Feb. 25 attack on a church service.

"Burkina Faso has been known for religious tolerance and social cohesion amongst people, however the growing Islamic insurgency threatens the peaceful coexistence of the Burkinabe," he explained.

In mid-February, members of the Burkina Faso and Niger bishops' conference said that at least 30 parishes had been closed and most pastoral activities disrupted due to ongoing insecurity, especially in the country's northern and eastern regions.

"Overall, some thirty parishes and their associated structures ... remain closed or inaccessible," the bishops said in a statement issued at the end of the Feb. 12-18 plenary assembly in the Diocese of Kaya, northeast of Ouagadougou, the country's capital.

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Martin Ouedraogo, a former catechist in the Diocese of Dori, said thousands of Christians across the country were troubled and afraid of attending Mass for fear of attacks.

The continuous attacks by jihadist groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State on Christians, he said, has instilled fear to express their faith in public. Those from Muslim backgrounds experience more violence and rejection from their families and communities.

"It's a crime to introduce yourself as a Christian in this country, especially in northern and eastern regions, and as a result, people are now afraid to

attend Mass," Ouedraogo said, noting that several churches have closed down. "We are discouraging congregants in most rural areas from attending Sunday worship services for safety reasons. But we urge all Catholics to pray from home and pray the rosary for an end to the terror attacks targeting Christians and places of worship."

Ouedraogo said that hundreds of church leaders and their families across denominations have been kidnapped and remained in captivity for years since the insurgency began in the landlocked country, which is ruled by a military dictatorship.

"Majority of Christians here are living in camps because they have been displaced from their homes due to their faith," he said, urging support for suffering Burkina Faso Christians with food donations and other basic needs. "Families have lost their loved ones, their homes, their properties, and their children have been pushed out of school and wandering in various displaced camps."

Meanwhile, Ouedraogo and other religious leaders urged the government to provide security to the Christian population and ensure freedom of worship.