News



A file photo shows Nigerian security personnel standing by a burnt building after violence in the town of Adikpo in Nigeria's Benue State. In an Aug. 23, 2024, statement, the US-based Catholic Medical Association called for the release of 20 Catholic medical school students kidnapped Aug. 15 in east-central Nigeria. (OSV News/George Esiri, Reuters)

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Catholic health care professionals have condemned the Aug. 15 kidnapping of 20 Catholic medical students in Nigeria.

In an Aug. 23 press release, the Catholic Medical Association — a professional organization headquartered in Philadelphia representing some 2,600 health care professionals — called for the immediate release of the students, who were traveling from two northern Nigeria universities to the southern city of Enugu for an annual convention by the Federation of Catholic Medical and Dental Students of Nigeria.

The federation, or FECAMDS, said in a statement that the students, all of whom were members of the organization, had been seized Aug. 15 at approximately 5 p.m. near Otukpo in Nigeria's Benue State.

"We have been thrown into a state of gloom and have been working tirelessly with relevant parties to ensure their speedy release," said FECAMDS. "We are already in close communication with the immediate families and everyone directly affected, to ensure the safe and swift return of our members."

On its X (formerly Twitter) account, FECAMDS has been posting Google Meetup notices for regular rosary prayers "seeking the face of God for the release of our medical students."

Kidnappers were demanding nearly $31,500 in ransom, according to Nigerian media outlets. They reported one of the students had posted a message on X saying, "Please help us, we haven't eaten for two days," adding that the kidnappers were threatening to kill the hostages.

"We appreciate the effort of the Federation of Catholic Medical and Dental Students of Nigeria (FECAMDS) in bringing attention to this situation," said Dr. Ellen Dailor, chair of CMA's medical missions committee, in the statement. "We stand in solidarity with them and pray for the students' safe release."

The CMA statement also noted that Nigeria's Catholic bishops have denounced "an epidemic of kidnapping" and Christian persecution in the West African nation. Nigeria remains one of the deadliest countries for followers of Jesus, with 82% of just under 5,000 Christian slayings last year taking place in that country, according to Open Doors U.S., an advocacy group that provides Bibles and support to persecuted Christians in more than 70 countries.

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On Christmas Eve 2023, at least 140 Nigerians were slain across some 15 central villages by rampaging herders wielding guns and machetes, the worst such attack in the region since 2018. The area has for several years been prone to clashes between Muslim Fulani herdsmen and mainly Christian farmers.

Previously, Joop Koopman, director of communications for Aid to the Church in Need in the United States — which serves persecuted Christians worldwide — told OSV News that "radicalized Muslim Fulani herdsmen" in Nigeria's north have "continued their killing spree, and no one is brought to justice."

"There was some hope that the fact that the new Nigerian president (Bola Ahmed Tinubu) is married to a practicing Christian would translate into government action against the Fulanis, but nothing has been done," said Koopman.

While media reports have tended to focus on the violence as a clash between farming and herding lifestyles, the International Committee on Nigeria has labeled the attacks as a "silent slaughter" that constitutes genocide.

CMA Past President Dr. Craig Treptow — who chairs the organization's international outreach committee and represents the group to the World Federation of Catholic Medical Associations — said in the Aug. 23 statement that "the persecution of Catholics is real.

"Threats of violence to health care workers and students should never be tolerated," he said.