News



Precious Timothy teaches Montessori class color identification March 9, 2021, at a school of inclusive education operated by the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in Uyo, Nigeria. There has been a significant decline in student enrollment in northern Nigeria amid high levels of insecurity and fear because Fulani herders, or ethnic militia, are killing, abducting and torturing Nigerian civilians unchallenged by government forces. (OSV News file/Valentine Iwenwanne)

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Katsina, Nigeria — September 3, 2024
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Back to school will be especially tough in Nigeria this year as a new report shows that Fulani herders, or ethnic militia, are killing Nigerian civilians unopposed.

Mass killings, abductions and the torture of whole families go largely unchallenged as government forces pursue targets hundreds of miles away, according to the research findings.

As the security situation in Nigeria worsens, an increasing number of schools, especially in the northern part of the country, face forced shutdown on the verge of a new academic year. This has led to a significant decline in student enrollment, with many citizens relocating within the country or going abroad.

A new report published Aug. 29 by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Africa — a four-year data project on religious persecution in Nigeria — showed that the most populous African country was an extremely violent and insecure place to live in the reporting period from October 2019 to September 2023, at least in parts of the country. In total, 55,910 people were killed in 9,970 attacks, while 21,621 people were abducted in 2,705 attacks, the report said.

"Many civilians lived in high levels of insecurity and fear of the unexpected," the report said. "Eye witnesses talked about children sleeping in trees at night," ORFA said. In total 30,880 civilians were killed in 6,942 attacks. The remaining 25,030 people killed were members of the security forces or terror groups.

The data shows that more Nigerian Christians were victims of violence than Nigerians with other religious affiliations. Among the 30,880 civilians killed during the four-year reporting period, the number of Christians killed was 16,769, while the number of Muslims killed was 6,235.

The Catholic Church, which operates most of the schools in the region, has reported that the schools have been shutting down in recent years due to concerns for safety, without needing explicit directives from the government.

"There has been a significant decline in student enrollment in northern Nigeria," Bishop Gerald Mamman Musa of Katsina in northern Nigeria told OSV News. "The insecurity in the area has persisted for years, making it difficult for parents to send their children to school," he said.

The West African nation with a population of more than 236 million has been facing terror attacks since in 2009 militant extremist Islamist groups Boko Haram and the Islamic State group in West Africa initiated an insurgency with the goal of overthrowing Nigeria's secular government and establishing an Islamic state. In 2011, the Fulani militants joined forces with Boko Haram, further escalating the Islamist insurgency in northern and central Nigeria with a focus on targeting Christians.

On April 14, 2014, Boko Haram gained global attention by kidnapping 276 school girls in the remote northern Nigerian town of Chibok, sparking global outrage and launching a worldwide campaign with the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls, which was supported by the former U.S. first lady Michelle Obama and other high profile figures. The terror group has since continued to abduct more schoolchildren and carry out attacks on schools, especially in the north.

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The impact of this violence on education has been significant. At least 10.5 million children in Nigeria do not go to school, which is the highest nonattendance rate in the world, according to UNICEF.

"The kidnappings of school-going children by Boko Haram has had a significant impact, leading to a decline in school attendance," lamented Musa.

"It's heartbreaking to witness the potential of these children being squandered due to the lack of security," he said. "The northern region of the country is at risk of raising a generation of individuals who are deprived of education, not by choice but due to circumstances beyond their control."

Catechist Emmanuel Ayuba from the Archdiocese of Kaduna in northern Nigeria told OSV News that the worsening insecurity poses a grave threat to the education system. The situation, he said, has led to widespread frustration among students, teachers and the government, resulting in a significant decline in educational standards.

Ayuba emphasized that in northern Nigeria children are rarely seen attending school.

"Due to safety concerns, teachers and students are confined to their homes, and many children have been displaced due to the ongoing insecurity," he said. "Sadly, education has taken a back seat for families in northern Nigeria, as their primary focus is on securing shelter and food for their survival."

The terror groups have been deliberately targeting Christians.

Home is one of the most dangerous places for Nigerian Christians. Most civilians were killed (25,312) or abducted (16,761) during attacks on their communities; in other attacks, 5,568 civilians were killed and 4,771 were abducted.

"Attacks on communities were especially devastating for the victims. They often involved a whole spectrum of violence, suffering and destruction, leading to high numbers of forcibly displaced people. Their fields were destroyed or taken over by the aggressors. … Ransom payment added to the loss of livelihood and often drove people deep into a debt trap," the Aug. 29 report said.

Nigeria is now ranked No. 6 on the World Watch List of advocacy group Open Doors U.K., which indicates a significant increase in violence against Christians, making it one of the most dangerous countries for Christians to live in.

"Many of our parishioners have relocated due to insecurity, resulting in the closure of schools," said Bishop Bulus Dauwa Yohanna of Kontagora in north-central Nigeria. "The terror groups have targeted Christians in their homes and schools, leading to the closure of learning institutions, churches, and the displacement of parishioners."

Catholic leaders are vehemently urging the Nigerian government to prioritize the security of all citizens, paving the way for children to resume their education and live without the constant threat of insecurity.

"It is extremely dangerous to send children and teachers back to schools without adequate security provided by the government," Ayuba said. "Our nation has already mourned the loss of many children and teachers due to terror attacks, and we cannot afford to risk more lives," the catechist lamented.

"The most effective measure the government can take is to significantly increase security presence in schools, especially in northern Nigeria," Musa added. "Implementing the government's safe school policy in all schools by deploying security personnel is crucial."

In addition, the bishop advised that the "institutions of learning can play a significant role by educating students about precautionary measures and self-defense skills in case of emergencies. This can include having emergency exits in dormitories and providing basic self-defense training, without arming the students."

"Let's unite to save the lives of our children. By providing them with a formal education, we can ensure their future, just like children everywhere," he told OSV News. "We must first secure our schools and launch awareness campaigns to encourage parents to send their children back to school."