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Archbishop asks for international help to stop terrorism in Nigeria

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VATICAN CITY -- The president of the Nigerian bishops' conference called for the international community to help his country improve its security operations to stop the "fundamentalist, fanatic" Boko Haram terrorist group.

The day after a Catholic church, an elementary school and a police station in Damagun were attacked, presumably by Boko Haram members, Archbishop Ignatius Ayau Kaigama of Jos told Vatican Radio: "There is high religious tension in Nigeria, but we are not at war between Christians and Muslims. The Boko Haram is at war with Christians, because they have vowed they will kill Christians because they are 'infidels.' This is a fact, but it is not the whole Islamic community."

In its two-year campaign to impose a strict interpretation of Islamic law on the entire country, Boko Haram has been blamed for more than 1,400 deaths of Christians, Muslims and police officers.

Kaigama, who was interviewed Monday in Rimini, Italy, where he addressed a meeting of the Communion and Liberation lay movement, told Vatican Radio that in his country, where the population is about half Muslim and half Christian, "there is no neat division between political problems and religious problems. They are intertwined."

"It is erroneous to always reduce every crisis in Nigeria to religion. Religion does a lot of good; we shouldn't see it as always generating crisis," the archbishop said.

In addition, he said, people must look for the root causes of tensions in Nigeria, including the economic, political and social issues that "trigger these crises, but somehow eventually they always become Christian-Muslim crises."

The vast majority of Nigerians -- Christians and Muslims -- want to live in peace and are frightened by the actions and agenda of Boko Haram, he said, "but somehow the violence continues to grow."

"The government seems helpless. The security agents, even though they are all over the place, don't seem to provide the security that would allow people to go about their normal business peacefully," Kaigama said.

"People are afraid that if this conflict situation continues, the consequences will be disastrous: There will be either an open, very terrible religious conflict or even a civil war that will pit the North against the South," he said.

The majority of people in the North are Muslim, while the majority of people in the South are Christian.

If there is war in Nigeria, he said, it will affect other West African nations and, perhaps, the whole continent.

"We don't want a war in Africa, that is why we are asking the international community to assist in a way that we can resolve the problems of security so that we can live happily in peace," the archbishop said.

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