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Public Statement

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Nigeria: Government must protect civilians, investigate and try the perpetrators of the recent killings in Plateau State

As the Nigerian government deploys security forces to restore order in Yelwa, Shendam local government area in Plateau State, following a recent outbreak of violence between Fulani cattle herders and Tarok farmers, Amnesty International is urging the Nigerian authorities to ensure adequate protection from further attacks, and to carry out thorough, independent and impartial investigations into the killings, including establishing the exact number of deaths.

The Federal Government should bring the perpetrators to justice in trials which must meet international standards of fairness and without recourse to the death penalty.

In the recent spate of violence, the attackers, mainly Christian Taroks, were armed with assault rifles, machetes and bows and arrows. Most of the victims were Muslims, including an unconfirmed number of women and children. The official number of deaths is put at 67, although the clashes may have resulted in as many as 630 deaths. The Nigerian Red Cross estimate that some 7,500 people have fled the area as a result of the prevailing insecurity.

In response to the incident, President Olusegun Obasanjo on 4 May ordered the deployment of more police to the area to restore law and order. An additional 600 armed mobile police and military personnel were sent to the area on 5 May.

Given the past conduct of the security forces in instances such as Odi and Benue, when they have been called in to deal with clashes, which were originally intra-communal, their actions have resulted in excessive use of force and unlawful killings. Human rights abuses, in which the Nigerian security forces have been implicated in, have often lead to impunity for the perpetrators.

Amnesty International is urging the mobile police and military personnel, in their attempts to restore law and order in Yelwa, to respect fundamental human rights, including by strictly adhering to the United Nations Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and the United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials. Principle 4 of the latter instrument states that law enforcement officials shall, as far as possible, apply non-violent means before resorting to the use of force and firearms.

Amnesty International is concerned about the proliferation of illegal small arms in Nigeria and reminds the Nigerian government to uphold its commitment under the ECOWAS Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Small Arms and Light Weapons signed in 1998.

Background

Access to the fertile lands of Plateau State is believed to have triggered the recent violence in Yelwa. It is believed that the attack was a reprisal for another incident in Kawo village, also Plateau State, during the previous week.

The last three months have seen at least 350 people killed in clashes and reprisal attacks between Christian Tarok farmers and Muslim Fulani cattle herders in different locations in Plateau State. Unconfirmed figures claim that the number of deaths is as high as 1,000. These figures include the killing of 100 Christians in the town of Yelwa in February, of whom 48 were massacred in a church.

Nigeria is home to approximately 130 million people with more or less equal numbers of Christians and Muslims. Clashes between the two religious groups have claimed at least 5,000 lives since 2000. In 2001, clashes between Christians and Muslims in Jos, Plateau State, resulted in over 1,000 deaths.

The whole of the west African region is awash with illegal arms, many of which are now found in Nigeria. The ECOWAS Executive Secretary has put the number of these firearms at "over 8 million" (IRINNEWS.org of 26 March 2004). Illegal weapons are reportedly manufactured locally but also enter the country through its porous borders. Some of the weapons originate in eastern European countries and come in to Nigeria via illegal import from other West African countries.