

Insurgents displace Nigerian Christians

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In the violence inflicted by Boko Haram insurgents in northeastern Nigeria, the Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria) has been increasingly caught in the middle.

Samuel Dante Dali, EYN president, called for urgent help from the international community in a letter he sent to the Church of the Brethren in the United States in November.

“The future of Nigeria is getting darker and darker day by day, but Nigerian political leadership does not seem to take the suffering of the people very seriously,” he said. “The government of Nigeria with all its security seems very weak and helpless in handling the crisis.”

In the past year many EYN churches have been destroyed, thousands of church members have been killed, and pastors and their families have been abducted in addition to the hundreds of schoolgirls from Chibok. (Most of their families are part of the EYN.) More than 90,000 EYN members—from a total of 160,000, according to the World Council of Churches, of which EYN is a member—have been displaced by the fighting this year.

At the end of October, Boko Haram seized EYN headquarters and Kulp Bible College, a denominational partner. The denominational staff is now displaced, but church leaders are working with international partners to provide food and shelter to those who have fled the violence.

“Mostly these people are sleeping in open air with little or nothing to eat,” Dali wrote. “We have been able to assist many of the families and pastors through the leadership of the District Church Councils.”

In the denomination’s temporary offices, Dali has received requests from pastors and others who need places to relocate.

“Also, it is very difficult to know how many have been killed, kidnapped, and no one knows what is happening with our properties at headquarters,” he wrote. “We have cried emotionally and to God for help.”

The takeover also leads to the loss of an EYN Rural Development Program agriculture project that had been providing eggs for local markets.

“They were known for the quality of their products and filled a niche in the region that in other parts of the world would be filled by either government agencies or private enterprise,” said Jeffrey S. Boshart, who manages the Global Food Crisis Fund for the Church of the Brethren.

The manager of the project in Nigeria, who is not named for safety reasons, said that after being displaced from the headquarters in September, staff returned daily to care for the poultry flock until the day of the attack on the EYN headquarters. The manager then fled with his family and Bible college students and others.

“We narrowly escaped gunshots and death,” he wrote in an e-mail. “My wife is seven months pregnant, and she was frightened from the gunshots.”

He now has difficulty feeding his family, as he left behind food in order to transport more people.

“My staff were scattered and have no help, all we have was spent on farms, and now we leave the produce behind which is no longer ours,” he wrote. “We desperately need your intensive prayers, because we Christians have no land to stay in the north, or shall we relocate ourselves to the south?”

Southern Nigeria is predominantly Christian. The nation has the largest number of Christians of any sub-Saharan African country, with 50.8 percent of the population being Christian, according to the Pew Research Center’s 2011 Global Christianity report. EYN is the largest Christian denomination in the part of northeast Nigeria where Boko Haram is operating. The first Brethren mission settlement in the 1920s was in Garkida, a village now under attack by Boko Haram. When missionaries settled there, after being directed to the area by the British colonial government, they received approval from community leaders, including Muslims.