

After kidnapping schoolgirls, Boko Haram takes aim at churches in northeast Nigeria

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September 3, 2014

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NAIROBI, KENYA (RNS) Five months after Boko Haram abducted more than 200 girls in Nigeria's Borno State, the Islamic extremist group has begun occupying churches in the country's northeastern region, church officials there said.

The militant group, which church leaders and analysts view as an African variation of the Islamic State, is also killing men, and forcing Christian women to convert to Islam and taking them as wives, officials said.

"Things are getting pretty bad," said the Rev. John Bakeni, the secretary of the Maiduguri Roman Catholic diocese in northeastern Nigeria. "A good number of our parishes in Pulka and Madagali areas have been overrun in the last few days."

The militants have turned the church compound and rectory of the St. Denis Parish in Madagali town into their base, the priest said. The militants overran the church center on August 23.

"The priest in charge managed to escape, but they took his car and important church documents," Bakeni said.

"Many civilians are now on the run," he added. "Many others are being trapped and killed. Life means nothing here. It's so cheap and valueless."

In 2009, the group launched its first military operation in Maiduguri, advocating for a strict form of Shariah. Since then, it has attacked churches, villages, government installations, and public places across north and northeastern Nigeria.

It has also carried out mass kidnappings in the region and is still holding captive more than 200 girls it grabbed from a local school in Chibok. The girls were kidnapped on April 14.

After seizing the Borno State town of Gwoza from government forces last month, the group's leader, Abubakar Shekau, announced an Islamic caliphate.

Church officials say a thin line divides Boko Haram and the Islamic State.

"The same ideology runs through their methods and disposition," Bakeni said.

With the rise of Boko Haram, scholars say Islamic extremism threatens Africa as much as it does the Middle East, the Arabian Peninsula, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"Boko Haram bears an inmate family resemblance to developments elsewhere in the Muslim world," wrote Charles Villa-Vicencio, a South African theologian and a visiting professor in the Conflict Resolution Program at Georgetown University, in the July/August edition of the *Horn of Africa Bulletin*. "Resilient Muslims are engaged in a fight-back against the western influence."