

Burkina Faso churches attacked as violence spikes

Until the past two years, Burkina Faso had long been known for interreligious peaceful co-existence.

by [Christian Century staff](#) in the [June 5, 2019](#) issue



The Sahel region in northwest Africa. Map by Daniel C. Richardson from multiple sources, including by [Munion](#) via [Creative Commons license](#).

Gunmen have attacked and set fire to two churches in northern Burkina Faso in recent weeks, killing 12 people as they left worship, including the pastor of each congregation.

On May 12, two dozen militants surrounded a Catholic church and executed six people in the small town of Dablo, Vatican News reported.

“From reports by eyewitnesses, it appears that their target was the 34-year- old Burkinabe priest, Father Siméon Yampa, in charge of interreligious dialogue in his diocese,” Vatican News wrote. Through increased attacks on Christian communities, militants “seek to drive a wedge between Christians and Muslims who have lived in peace for ages.”

Two weeks prior, on April 28, gunmen opened fire at a Protestant church in Silgadji, killing the pastor, a deacon, and four others. In addition to the attacks on houses of worship, militants also killed four Christians during a Via Crucis procession earlier in April in a nearby village and assassinated a Spanish priest and four customs officers in February, according to Catholic news sources. A parish priest in Djibo disappeared in March.

Local armed groups, some affiliated with the self-described Islamic State and al-Qaeda, have been active in recent years in the West African nation, according to reports.

“These terrorist groups are now attacking religion with the macabre aim of dividing us,” government officials wrote in a statement.

The World Council of Churches, which has member churches in Burkina Faso, notes that more than 90 percent of the people are subsistence farmers, nomadic herders, or otherwise engaged in agricultural work. Drought has been a recurring threat in recent decades.

Approximately 60 percent of Burkinabe people are Muslim. “Islam was introduced to the area during the 18th century, and Christianity came with colonization,” the WCC writes. Among the quarter of the population that is Christian, more than half are Catholic, with Protestants being primarily evangelical or Pentecostal. The Assemblies of God has the largest denominational presence with 800,000 members.

The church in Silgadji belonged to the Assemblies of God, and the militants attacking it demanded conversion, the Assemblies general superintendent in Burkina Faso said in a statement he sent to *Christianity Today*. Pastor Pierre Ouédraogo, 80, was aware of the possibility of an attack, yet chose “to die for his faith rather than leave the village where he has served for nearly 40 years,” his son-in-law said, according to the superintendent.

The towns of Silgadji and Dablo are both near the border with Mali. There has been a large spike in deadly violence in the past five months across the Sahel region of north central Africa with thousands of people being killed, as recorded by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project.

“Conflict in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso is a major driver of the escalation—and civilians have faced the brunt of the violence,” wrote the ACLED Project, which receives funds from the Dutch and US governments, among other sources.

Until the past two years, Burkina Faso had long been known for “peaceful co-existence among religious communities,” wrote the organization Open Doors, which advocates for Christians who are facing persecution.

Henri Yé, president of the Federation of Evangelical Churches and Missions in Burkina Faso, urged people not to fall into the attackers’ divisive thinking, Open Doors and *Christianity Today* reported.

“In the face of blind hatred, let us ask God to give us the strength to spread love, which makes us the children of God,” Yé said. “The unity of the body of Christ and of the whole nation must be preserved at all costs.”