

Nigerian Christians condemn separatist group's sit-at-home order

by [Ekpali Saint](#) in the [April 6, 2022](#) issue



Indigenous People of Biafra activists protest in London outside the British Parliament in 2016. (Photo by Alisdare Hickson used via Creative Common License)

Many Nigerian Christian leaders have condemned a weekly sit-at-home order in the southeastern region of the country that is being enforced by the Indigenous People of Biafra, a group agitating for the creation of a separate state for Nigeria's 40 million ethnic Igbo people.

IPOB began the stay-at-home order in August 2021 to push for the release of its leader, Nnamdi Kanu, who has been in custody of the Department of State Services since June 2021. The IPOB order "advises" all public places like markets, schools, airports, and churches in southeastern Nigeria to remain closed on Mondays. "We understand the economic implications of this measure but we are constrained to take it so that the world will know that our leader, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, is not alone in the struggle for Biafra autonomy," the group said in a statement at the time.

Technically, IPOB suspended the sit-at-home order in September 2021 and has since attempted to distance itself from it, blaming continued enforcement on “hoodlums and cultists”—a claim many Nigerians disbelieve.

Meanwhile, Christian leaders say that people living in Nigeria’s five southeast states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo are still being denied active participation in religious activities for fear of being exposed to violence and attack—a big problem in a culture where religious activities adhere to a strict schedule and economic activities allow little room for flexibility. Sometimes it is almost impossible to move an event from one day to another.

Anslem Amadi, the assistant chaplain at the St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Chaplaincy in Owerri, said religious activities slated for Mondays or days that Kanu is scheduled to appear in court have been canceled in order to protect people from violence.

“Burials that were slated to take place on Mondays were pushed down to Tuesdays—and Tuesdays happen to be days of office for our diocesan priests. So it has adversely affected religious activities,” he said, adding that the sit-at-home order has “affected the whole diary and program of the diocese.”

Kanu was first arrested in 2015 for inciting violence. His 11 charges included treasonable felony, managing an unlawful society, and the illegal possession of firearms.

In April 2017, he was granted bail for medical reasons but then fled Nigeria after security operatives raided his home in Abia State. In September 2017, the Nigerian government obtained a court order declaring IPOB a terrorist group, and in June 2021, Kanu was rearrested in an undisclosed foreign country. When extradited to Nigeria, he was re-arraigned and prosecuted on a seven-count charge.

In response, IPOB members expressed their grievances by ensuring total compliance with the sit-at-home order, resorting to violence if necessary.

“IPOB said its action is an opportunity to express its displeasure. But it is affecting every other activity, including religious activities,” Amadi said. “People who love to go to the church to pray for the well-being of the region are prevented.”

Joel Arinze, pastor of St. John’s Anglican Church in Enugu, agrees.

“The way IPOB members are going about this is not good. There is fear of attack by IPOB members,” he said. “Killings in some places in the region have discouraged Christians. And now, we record low interest and zeal in religious activities.”

Meanwhile, another Enugu-based Anglican pastor, Emmanuel Asogwa, said his congregation no longer has the opportunity to gather every Monday to study the Bible.

“The essence [of the gathering] is to gather to pray, listen to the word of God, and win souls,” he said. “But we now have it every Tuesday. This change has affected the church’s calendar, which results [in] disorderliness.”

Amadi said he wants the violence to stop.

“We are stressed out, and it has not been easy for me. These days, it’s like having 48 hours in a day; carrying out activities of two days in a day. I choose activities to attend because I can’t attend all under such stress,” he said. “Now, those who like coming to church are denied access. They feel we are far from God.” —Ekpali Saint for the Century