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## Religion not Single Cause of Nigeria Violence

by Heather Murdock

About 4,000 Nigerians have been killed by violence during the past 11 years in Plateau State, according to Human Rights Watch. Locals say the conflict may be along ethnic and religious lines, but the root of the fighting is often political and economic.

Nigeria is often described as predominantly Muslim in the North and mostly Christian in the South. In between, there is the "Middle Belt," an area that during the past 11 years has seen enough massacres, bombings and assassinations to make locals wonder if there will ever again be peace.

### Religious, economic divide

Violence in the "Middle Belt" is often described as a "religious crisis" between Muslims and Christians, who also differ ethnically and in legal and economic status.

Human Rights Watch says Jos, the capital of Plateau State and a hotbed of sectarian violence, has been quieted by government security forces in the past year, but violence continues in the countryside.

Elkanah Joseph is from Jos, which before 2001 was known for balmy weather and tourism. He says fighting began that year over politics, and tensions have escalated. Muslims are afraid walk into Christian neighborhoods and Christians fear Muslim areas.

And despite the massive security presence in Jos, Joseph says fighting continues in the shadows.

"They are still doing some silent killing in Jos, even with the security on the ground," he said. "They are still killing some people, every day they discover some dead bodies."

Joseph believes the ones engaged in fighting are really just young, undereducated and unemployed pawns of a warring elite.

"Most people that fight the religion crisis are people that do not have jobs," he said. "You do not expect somebody that is educated and learned and working in a good place to want and go and kill another person."

What Joseph calls the religious crisis, however, is actually a sectarian fault line drawn by many factors besides religion and ethnicity.

### A diverse population

Across Nigeria, people are classified as "indigenous" or "settlers" or "non-indigenes." Non-indigenes are people who have moved away from their traditional homes - sometimes generations ago - and they often do not enjoy privileges like scholarships and some government jobs.

In Plateau State, Muslims cattle-herders are usually classified as non-indigenes and are ethnically Fulani-Hausa. Christian farmers are usually classified as indigenous and are ethnically Berom, Anaguta or Afizere.

Journalist Lubem Gena is from Benue State, another tumultuous "Middle Belt" region and has lived in Jos for six years. He says fights often begin over land disputes between farmers and cattle-herders and then spiral into sectarian battles.

"What are they saying? A Fulani man who is ordinarily a Muslim has taken his cattle into somebody's farm who is a Berom man which ordinarily is a Christian," he said.

When fighting breaks out, he adds, revenge killings make matters worse and authorities rarely bring perpetrators to justice.

"I have never heard of anybody that was convicted for participating in any crime as far as these sectarian killings are concerned. I have never heard of anybody that has been convicted, given life sentence, given death sentence or given whatever amount of years imprisonment," he said.

### **Boko Haram**

Since 2009, sectarian violence in the Middle Belt has been blurred by attacks blamed on the Islamist sect Boko Haram. Human Rights Watch researcher Eric Guttschuss says Boko Haram attacks are unrelated to sectarian battles - but they may exacerbate the problem, giving Christians and Muslims more reason to fear the other.

"The risk is that if those attacks continue that they will spark or set off a further round of communal clashes or communal violence in Plateau State," he said.

Boko Haram has been waging an insurgency against the Nigerian government since 2009. Human Rights Watch says the group has killed more than 1,000 people attacking churches, schools, marketplaces, government offices and security forces.

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<http://www.voanews.com/content/religion-not-single-cause-violence-nigeria/940463.html>