

Christmas holiday attacks kill at least 38 in Nigeria

(AFP) – 7 hours ago

JOS, Nigeria — A series of unprecedented Christmas Eve bomb blasts and attacks on churches have left at least 38 people dead in Nigeria as authorities worked Saturday to keep the violence from spreading.

Seven explosions went off in two different areas of the flashpoint city of Jos in central Nigeria, killing 32 people and injuring 74, many of them as they were doing their Christmas shopping, police said.

In the city of Maiduguri in northern Nigeria, suspected members of an Islamist sect that launched an uprising last year attacked three churches, leaving six people dead and one of the churches burnt, an army spokesman said.

There was no immediate indication the incidents in the vast country's north and central regions were linked.

Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan pledged that those behind the bombings would be brought to justice.

"The president expressed sadness at explosions which killed many innocent Nigerians, Christians and Muslims alike, in Jos, Plateau State," a statement from his office said.

The situation was especially tense in Jos, which has been previously hit by sectarian unrest that many observers say has been stoked by politics and which has killed hundreds this year.

Police sought to calm the situation after some residents reported that a gang of youths had barricaded a road leading to an area where one blast occurred and had set about five vehicles ablaze.

Previous violence in the region has often involved inter-communal clashes and reprisals, and the explosions marked a dramatic turn in the situation.

"This is the very first time explosives of this magnitude are involved," Plateau state police commissioner Abdulrahman Akano said.

Police had not determined who was behind the blasts, he said, adding it appeared dynamite was used.

"People were doing their shopping," he said of the areas where the explosions went off. "The place targeted had all kinds of people there -- Muslims, non-Muslims."

Jos, the capital of Plateau state, is in the so-called middle-belt region between the predominantly Muslim north and the mainly Christian south and has long been a hotspot of ethnic and religious friction in Nigeria.

Local rights groups say 1,500 people have died in inter-communal violence in the Jos region this year alone.

"The aim of the mastermind is to pit Christians against Muslims and spark off another round of violence that will eventually culminate in the scuttling of the ongoing electioneering activities," Plateau state governor Jonah David Jang said in an address carried on local television.

Elections are set for April in Nigeria and observers have warned of an increase in violence as the polls approach.

The Maiduguri attacks in the north were the latest violence blamed on the sect known as Boko Haram, behind an uprising last year that ended with a police and military assault which left hundreds dead.

Sect members have been blamed for a series of attacks in recent months, including shootings of police officers and community leaders as well as raids on police posts and a prison.

"In an attack on a Baptist church in Alamderi area, five worshippers including a pastor of the church were killed by gunmen suspected to be members of Boko Haram," Lieutenant Abubakar Abdullahi said.

In another area of the city, a security guard was killed when suspected sect members attacked another church, he said.

Soldiers managed to repel a third attack on a church in Maiduguri.

He said the Baptist church was burnt down, along with the house of the pastor next to it.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and one of the world's largest oil producers, faces tremendous challenges in organising the April elections and is seeking to overcome a history of vote fraud and violence.

In addition to violence in the Jos region and in the north, militants in the oil-producing Niger Delta have carried out scores of attacks in recent years, including kidnappings of foreign oil workers and sabotage of pipelines.

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People walk past an armoured tank stationed at the main gate of the state police headquarters in Maiduguri

