



Aid to the
Church in Need

ACN INTERNATIONAL

NIGERIA

A BLEEDING WOUND




TESTIMONIES

OF VICTIMS OF PERSECUTION AND VIOLENCE

PONTIFICAL
FOUNDATION





“Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit”.

(John 12, 24)

“I am the way, and the truth and the life”.

(John 14, 6)

Testimonies collected in the field by Patience Ibile, in cooperation with Joop Koopman from Aid to the Church in Need (ACN USA)

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INTRODUCTION

ACN has been highlighting the plight of Christians in Nigeria for many years with growing concern, calling the country one of the most dangerous for Christians in the world. Nigeria's longstanding security challenges are immense and varied in terms of causes and geography. The situation has become increasingly complicated over the past ten years.

A major factor in all cases is the poor social, cultural and educational conditions of the Nigerian population, as well as political mismanagement and corruption. It is often difficult to understand the boundaries between outright persecution, Islamic extremism, historical ethnic rivalries and outright banditry. Conflicts have different roots and almost all of them combine a mixture of elements in their development.

However, it is a fact that Christians in Nigeria are suffering across the country. It is a bleeding wound. When analysing persecution in Nigeria, different reports offer varying figures, more or less precise and difficult to verify. ACN prefers to put a face and voice to the many brothers and sisters in the faith who have been victims of persecution and violence in Nigeria. Their stories are unthinkable, but they are true. During research trips we have found dozens of widows, orphans, elderly, young people and children who have suffered persecution and barbaric violence in their own skin.

In this publication ACN present 26 testimonies of pain, suffering, persecution and violence, collected by Patience Ibile in Maiduguri, Makurdi and Owo.

Sharing these testimonies of suffering, we want to call on institutions to act and ask the Nigerian authorities to do everything possible to protect the lives and homes of all Nigerians. We call on organisations to work for justice in the country and we encourage people of good will, around the world, to pray for peace in Nigeria and support the Catholic Church in its work as a mediator and sower of dialogue between religions and ethnicities.



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TESTIMONIES
OF VICTIMS OF PERSECUTION
AND VIOLENCE



I VICTIMS OF BOKO HARAM AND ISWAP MILITANTS

Most events involving Islamist militants occurred in Borno state, where the group has traditionally been more active. It once controlled an area of the size of Belgium but military campaigns have moved the militants back to local spots on the fringes of Lake Chad, the heart of the Sambisa Forest, and local villages in Adamawa and Borno. ISWAP acts close to Lake Chad and Boko Haram in the Sambisa Forest.

The most targeted group has been Christians, who have seen their places of worship laid to waste, as well as often being attacked and killed along the highways and seeing their livelihood destroyed. However, it is important to note that the fact that the terrorist groups operate in states with a predominantly Muslim population means that the violence has not only affected Christians, but also Muslims.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations' Nigeria Security Tracker, more than 41,600 people have been killed in Nigeria in the Boko Haram conflict, including civilians, Boko Haram fighters and state agents, other sources speak about more than 65,000 people killed between 2011 and 2022.



STORIES

BOKO HARAM SENT HIS LIFE UP IN FLAMES, BUT GOD GAVE HIM A FUTURE

1 JAMES JOHN MAIDUGU (56)

Uprooted from his family's home in Gulak, Adamawa State, Nigeria. In the wake of repeated Boko Haram attacks, he settled with his wife and children in Baga, close to Lake Chad. Recovering from the fear of Boko Haram, he began earning a reasonable income from building up his fishing business, allowing the family to eat twice a day and his wife to set up a small business. However, the family's relief was short-lived: Boko Haram attacked Baga. John spoke with Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) about his family's plight.



What happened to you?

It all happened on 3 January, 2015, when I left Lake Chad to go to Baga to spend some time with my family. As usual, that fateful day, at 3am I woke up to say my Divine Mercy prayers. I suddenly saw a reflection of light in my room. I decided to open the window to see what was happening and I was shocked to see that Boko Haram had surrounded the whole community. They set people's houses ablaze, as well as shops, and other properties. They came close to my house and set my neighbours' houses on fire. I heard people screaming for help, but there was nothing I could do.

I closed my eyes and said, "Lord please have mercy on me and my family", and I thought to myself,

the next house to be set on fire would be mine, as all my neighbour's houses were already burning. I was shaking but never stopped saying those words, "Lord have mercy on me and my family." I was intensely concentrating on saying those words over and over again. I had my eyes closed and expected our house to be torched any minute. But I was not noticing any smoke, nor was my family screaming for help. Everything seemed calm. I slowly opened my eyes, and I was surprised to see my house unharmed. They set every house in my community on fire -except mine.

When they left, I rushed out and scanned the area, knowing that friends, relatives, and neighbours had been burned alive. I then turned and looked at my house, which was still standing tall. You could imagine my feelings, as I considered



that everyone around us was gone, having died in their homes. Everyone gone except my family. I rushed inside the house and found my wife and children crying and thanking God for saving our lives. I immediately joined them, but I was not able to say a word. I kept on wondering how it was even possible that we were spared. Is that how God works? God, indeed, works in mysterious ways. Later in the day security personnel came to my community; they were shocked to see what happened and they asked me if I put a charm in my house to make Boko Haram terrorists go blind so that they did not see my house. I replied: "God did it." The day after the ugly incident, my family and I began our journey to Maiduguri. The bishop of Maiduguri welcomed us warmly and offered us a place to stay in the camp. The diocese has been offering individual counseling sessions starting in 2020, and group sessions starting in early 2021.

Please describe your experiences at the Trauma Centre

My experience at the Centre was powerful. When I first came to the camp, the diocese was feeding me and my family until I was able to stand on my own feet again. I was able to overcome my fear and start life all over again. All the credit goes to the Trauma Centre for helping me and my family let go of our bitter past and move ahead. They encouraged us in friendship and helped us not think too much of the friends, neighbours, and relatives we have lost.

What practical, emotional, and spiritual skills did you learn?

I learned to let go of my past and give peace a chance. My prayer life has improved significantly. There is power in praying the rosary and the Divine Mercy prayers. If only Catholic faithful would know the power found in these two prayers, they would be praying the rosary and the Divine Mercy prayers more often. They are so powerful. I can testify to that.

Has your suffering brought you closer to God?

My suffering brings me closer to God. I am praying like never before. I trust Him like never before and I am willing and ready to give my life for His Church and His Gospel. My pain has never in any way challenged my faith in God. I cannot stop being a Christian. I cannot stop being a Catholic, and I won't stop practicing and professing my faith, until my last breath.

Can you forgive those who hurt you?

I have forgiven them, and I have forgotten. At first, it was hard to forgive my loved ones as they abandoned us, when we fled Baga, when we needed them the most. But now I hold no grudge against any of them. I have forgiven and let go.

What are your hopes for the future?

God is my hope for the future. I have God in my life and that means I have everything. So, I need not worry about tomorrow, God will take care of it as He always does. I know God will always make a path for us. I desire to give my children the best education and the best life so that they will not go through the same pain and hardship that I have gone through in life. I am working very hard to do that, and I pray that all my heart's desires will end in praise.



NINE YEARS IN THE HANDS OF BOKO HARAM, “WORDS CANNOT DO JUSTICE TO WHAT I SUFFERED”

2 Maryamu Joseph (16)

Two months ago, Maryamu Joseph escaped from Boko Haram after being held for nine years. Along with 21 others, she was abducted in 2014 at the age of seven when the terror group attacked her community of Bazza and took her to a camp. Two of her siblings were later taken to the same camp, where one was killed and the other remains in captivity.



How would you describe what you went through?

Nine years of living in bondage! Nine years of torture! Nine years of agony! We suffered so much at the hands of these heartless, ruthless people. For nine years we saw the shedding of the innocent blood of my fellow Christians, killed by people who do not value life. They murdered without remorse, like it's a normal thing to do. These nine wasted years in the Sambisa Forest cannot be forgotten in a blink of an eye. Words cannot do justice to what I've gone through.

When and how were you captured?

Boko Haram attacked my community in February 2013. After a killing spree that left countless dead, they took 22 of us into a thick forest, we trekked for 22 days before arriving at our destination. They put the Christians in cages, like animals. The first thing they did was forcefully convert us to Islam. They changed my name to Aisha, a Muslim name, and warned us not to pray as Christians, or we would be killed. When I turned 10, they wanted to marry me to one of their bosses, but I refused. As punishment, they locked me in a cage for an entire year. They brought food

once a day and pushed it under the door without ever opening the cage.

In November 2019, they captured two of my siblings and brought them to the camp. Only God knows how I felt when I saw them. I was full of intense anger, I felt like picking up a machete and butchering them one by one. Right before my eyes, they took one of my siblings and killed him. They cut off his head, then his hands, legs, and stomach. They treated my brother's body just like a chicken before it's cooked. I was devastated. I asked myself, "Who's next?". A few days later I started having nightmares, I started hallucinating. I saw people and heard voices that I don't even know. Sometimes armed people came close to me, to hurt me. When I screamed, I would feel a hand on my shoulder, and one of my fellows would say: "Calm down! Breathe! You will be fine." That was when I realised it was just a dream.

**You were held captive for nine years. How did you manage to escape?**

On 8 July 2022, at around 1am, the camp was quiet, and everybody was asleep except my fellow hut members and I. The twelve of us decided to run away. At first, I was confused whether to stay because of my younger sister, who was in another hut, but I figured I could spend the rest of my life in this camp, so I had to leave, no matter what. We snuck out of the camp and ran through the thick forest. We kept going as long as our legs would carry us, for two days, until we finally arrived in Maiduguri on 10 July 2022. When we arrived, I fainted, and when I woke up I was in the arms of a good Samaritan. He gave us water and food to recover our strength and later I came to the Church-run camp.

What has your experience at the Trauma Centre been like?

The first thing they did was to pray for me and encourage me to come back to my faith. I am happy to return to Christianity. Since I returned to Maiduguri the pain has decreased. I am hoping that, with time, God will help me overcome my bitterness and embrace peace, though I do not see that happening any time soon. I still feel that pain echoing in my ears. I still have nightmares, though not as bad as before. Thanks to the Trauma Centre I no longer hallucinate.

What have you learned at the Trauma Centre?

When I first arrived in Maiduguri, before starting my healing process, I couldn't stand men! I couldn't come eye to eye with them. They disgusted me! Now, thanks to my healing process, I have learned to let go of the hate.

I believe I have learned how to adapt to the outside world, and how to talk to people. I am beginning to relate to my counsellors in a very friendly manner, not in an aggressive way as was the case at the beginning of my healing process.

In terms of working skills, I want to learn how to make beautiful dresses, shoes, and bags.

Has your suffering brought you closer to God?

What I went through drew me far away from God. I find it so difficult to come back to God. I find it hard to trust Him. I am trying to tell myself that He is still God, but it is not sinking in. I felt abandoned by God because of what I went through. They say that God is all-powerful and that He is not a partial God. Then why did He not help me when I needed Him the most?

Has all this challenged your faith?

Yes, but it's getting better by the day. Coming back to Christianity after nine years of practicing Islam involves a lot of hard work. It looks almost impossible at first. My mind is still heavy, full of anger, bitterness and anguish. The pain comes and goes. One minute I am happy, the next minute the sorrow returns.

Do you think you can forgive those who hurt you and your loved ones?

Forgive those heartless beings? I don't think I am able to forgive them. I need time to digest all that has happened to me then maybe, just maybe, we can then talk about forgiveness. But today, no, I cannot forgive them.

What are your hopes for the future?

At the moment I am not thinking about that. I just want to be me again. I want to be set free from the pain and the anguish I am feeling. But soon I would like to get an education, go to school, learn how to make friends, how to speak and express myself in English.

I would like to study law to defend the defenceless. I am calling on anyone touched by God to help me. My life doesn't feel fully and truly safe, I need to leave this environment and start afresh. I would be happiest if I could get a scholarship to go to school. I am just thinking aloud, but I would be super excited if my wish was granted.



BOKO HARAM DID “THE UNTHINKABLE” TO HER, BUT JANADA REFUSED TO BE DEFEATED

3 JANADA MARCUS (22)

The terrorist organisation took her father’s life, and tried to crush her soul, but with the help of the ACN-built Trauma Centre in Maiduguri she is back on her feet and even found the strength to forgive those who caused her so much pain.

Janada Marcus and her family had already escaped two attacks by Boko Haram unscathed, once abandoning their home in Baga Local Government Area in Nigeria’s Lake Chad region and a second time fleeing their new home in Askira Uba, in southern Borno State, where their house was burned down, and a number of relatives were killed by the Islamists. Eventually they made their way to Maiduguri, but the worst was yet to come.

Speaking to **Aid to the Church in Need (ACN)**, Janada Marcus described how Boko Haram almost destroyed her life.



After fleeing Boko Haram twice, your family settled in Maiduguri. Then what happened?

My father had obtained a piece of land very close to Maiduguri to start farming, to help the family financially. We were happy that all the nightmares we had experienced before had finally come to an end. Then came 20 October 2018, the day that took away the sunshine in our lives. We were at the farm, working happily, and singing some catholic songs to raise our spirits, when suddenly we were surrounded by Boko Haram.

When I saw them, many thoughts ran through my

mind: should I run away? If I do, what about my parents? What if they caught us even before we start running? Should I scream for help? Would anyone come to our rescue? I decided to remain calm and let God perform a miracle. But they did the unthinkable to us.

What, exactly, did they do?

They pointed a machete at my father and told him they would set us free if he had sex with me. I could not hold back my tears! I was shaking, but I could do nothing! My mother could not utter a word due to the state of shock she was in. With a



machete pointed at my father's forehead, he looked at my mother and at me, but I avoided eye contact because I was ashamed to look him in the face, ashamed of what the men had suggested – it was an abomination!

My father put his head down in submission to be killed and answered: "I cannot sleep with my own flesh and blood, my own daughter, I would rather die than commit this abomination".

What did the terrorists do?

On hearing this, one of the men took out a machete and cut off my father's head, right in front of us. The pain that I felt at that moment, was unbearable. My father's blood was splattered all over the ground. Could you imagine the torture, the pain that I was going through at that moment? I pleaded with God to take my life; I was already a living corpse, but He turned a deaf ear! I found extraordinary courage, rushed and took my head band to tie the head of my father to stop the blood from gushing out.

You survived that attack. But that was not the end of your terror at the hands of Boko Haram...

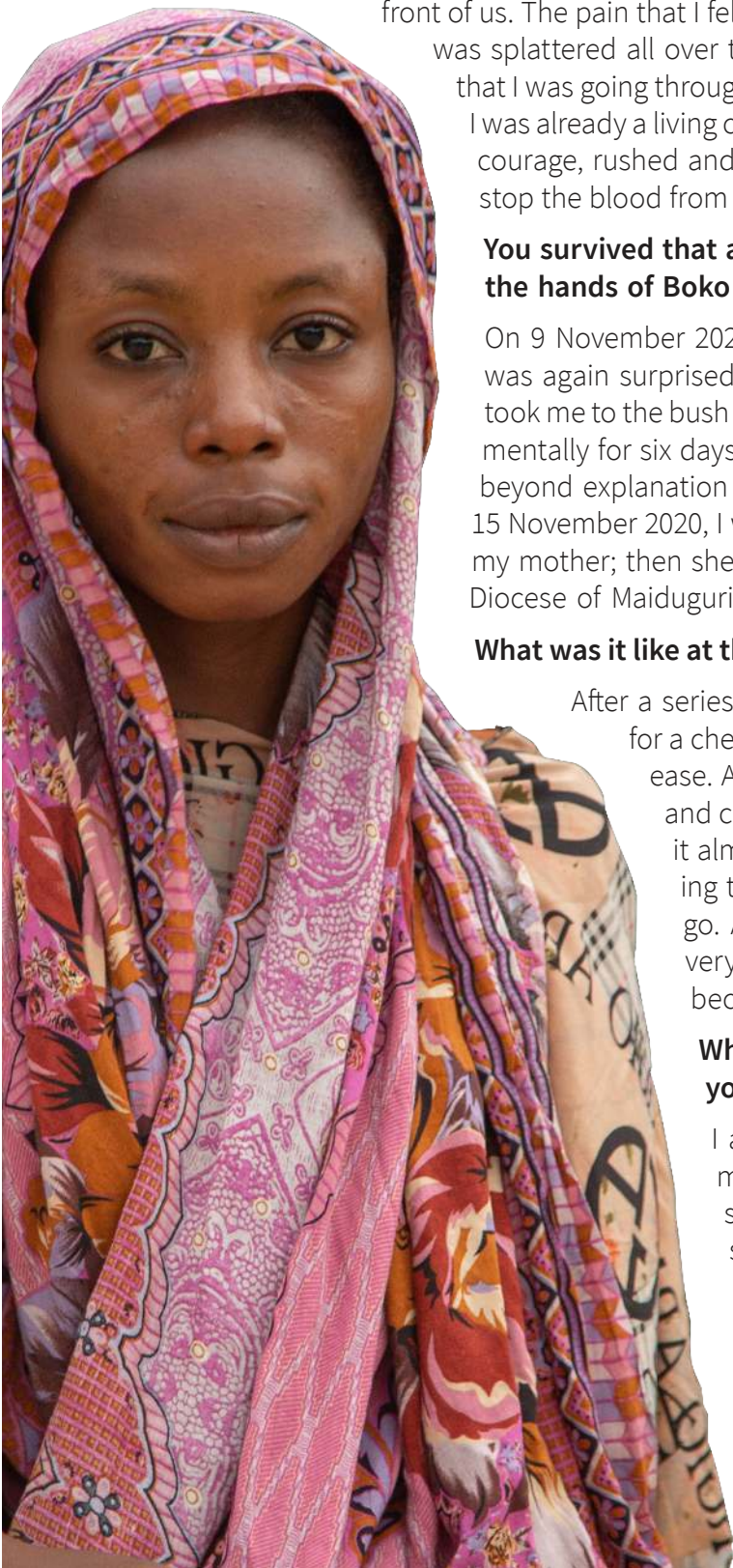
On 9 November 2020, I was on the way to a Government office when I was again surprised by Boko Haram. This time they captured me. They took me to the bush and tortured me severely, emotionally, physically and mentally for six days. I suffered a lot of terrible and wicked experiences – beyond explanation – that made those six days seem like six years. On 15 November 2020, I was released. I came back and spent a few days with my mother; then she brought me to the Trauma Centre, operated by the Diocese of Maiduguri.

What was it like at the Trauma Centre?

After a series of counselling sessions, I was taken to the hospital for a check-up and treatment in case I had contracted any disease. After that, I underwent six months of healing, prayers and counselling. Now I am back on my feet. At first, I found it almost impossible to let go of my past, but after spending those months at the Trauma Centre, I was able to let go. After my healing process, I enrolled in college. I am very happy, and I will give it my all to finish my degree and become someone great in society.

What practical, emotional, and spiritual skills did you learn?

I acquired new skills that have made me so proud of myself. I have learned to knit beautiful baby caps, socks, trousers, and cardigans which will help me earn some cash. Emotionally, I have learned to let go of my past; I have learned the art of healing by letting go of my pain. My faith has strengthened.





Has your suffering brought you closer to God?

At first my experience drew me away from God. It was difficult to trust and come back to Him. Ironically, in the end my bitter experience has brought me closer to God, but at one point I felt like giving up. I felt that being a Christian was a total waste of time.

Where was God when they butchered my father? Where was God when I was going through torture, agony, hardship? Where was God when I went to bed on an empty stomach? After my healing process, I got answers to all my questions. I have learned that God is still God. Amidst all that I have gone through, I will still trust Him, and I will serve Him for the rest of my life.

Can you forgive those who hurt you?

It's hard to forgive and forget, and with all that I have gone through at the hands of Boko Haram I can't even believe that I am the one saying this, but I have forgiven them in my heart, and I pray for the redemption of their souls.

4 Philemon Aviga (55)

My name is Philemon Aviga, I am from Koja, in Borno State. Boko Haram chased us out of our village and burned our houses, those who were lucky enough to survive were left homeless. Without shoes, I made my way to one of the camps run by the Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) of the Diocese of Maiduguri. On reaching the camp I saw my Christian brothers and I was full of joy, I felt at home. They were happy to see me and my family. They welcomed us warmly and encouraged us to let go of the past and start afresh. We begin everything in prayer and end everything in prayer. When one of us dies or is bereaved, we sympathize and encourage one another to move on. It took us some time to let go. Through the Trauma Centre [established by ACN] we were able to successful-



ly undergo a process of healing, which helped us to get rid of our past pain, to settle in the camp and start life anew. The process increased my faith in God. We have been in the camp for eight years and I have learned new ways of doing things, new skills. I have learned how to make beautiful shoes and very soon I will be so good that it will become a source of income to support my family. What Boko Haram did to us, if we were in the flesh, cannot be forgiven. But we are Christians, and the Bible teaches us to forgive those who offend and hurt us, so that we can find forgiveness ourselves. I have forgiven them, and I pray that one day God will use them for His glory.



5 Maryamu Ishaya (36)

My name is Maryamu Ishaya, I am from Askira. I am living in Shuari camp – one of the camps run by the Diocese of Maiduguri – due to a Boko Haram attack on my community. Thank God I was able to escape with my family. We have been in the camp for more than eight years now and we have seven children. Coming to the camp and meeting with trauma counsellors was the best decision I have ever made. My mind is at rest. I have this peace that can only come from within. I am happy here in the camp: I have a roof over my head, I never go to bed on an empty stomach, my life and that of my family is protected and my faith in God is not threatened. I am not idle – what else do I need? I just want to

say thank you to the Diocese of Maiduguri, to the Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) and to ACN for all their efforts to get us back on our feet.



6 Rifkatu Innocent (33)

I am Rifkatu Innocent, from Gosa, and I left my village to settle in this camp due to Boko Haram attacks. They took everything I held dear. I was on the verge of committing suicide when a Good Samaritan found me and brought me to the camp. So far, I have spent five years here. Coming here changed my life for the better. At first, I was full of anger, bitterness, anguish and sadness. I was indeed depressed that I lost everything, but I am happy now that I have learned the art of forgiveness through my counselling sessions at the Trauma Centre. I have forgiven and I have forgotten, and I have moved on.

I don't know what the future holds for me, but I am ready to face whatever life has to offer. I am no longer bitter nor sad, as I was five years ago, I have no space in my heart for bitterness. Life in the camp is so simple. Although I may not have everything I ever wanted, I am grateful that God has given me the gift of beautiful souls to spend the remaining days of my life with. I will serve Him until my last breath.

I was fortunate to meet different people from different states, and even countries, and I have learned a lot from them. Plus, my counseling has encouraged my faith, made me a better version of myself and challenged me to do away with the pain of my past bitter experiences. To start a new life, I have learned how to make lovely shoes and beads, which by the grace of God, will help me start my own shoes and beads business soon. I would have started already, but I need start-up income. I believe that God will surely help me find a way. Where there is life, there is hope.





| 7 Gladys Luka (35)

My name is Gladys Luka, I am from Maiduguri. I am one of the facilitators in the camp. I teach some of the women how to make beautiful dresses. They have been giving their all to learning. Most of them are picking up new skills quickly. I specialize in fashion design and, so far, I have been able to successfully train 20 people, five of whom graduated and opened shops of their own and are now also training others. We train them so they can teach others and that should serve as a means of people getting income to support themselves. They started their training less than two years ago and most of them are now able to make dresses for themselves, their children, their fellow camp members, and even people outside the camp. If they continue like this, imagine what they will be able to do in the years to come! Learning to do new things takes their mind off the past and helps them earn a livelihood.



| 8 James Mathias, 33

My name is James Matthias, and I am from Maiduguri. I am Catholic and I was born and brought up in the Catholic faith. I work with the Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC), as one of the facilitators in the Polo camp in Maiduguri. I am also the project manager of SILK, which stands for Savings and Internal Lending Communities. It is a self-selecting activity that helps to build people's financial capacity and boost the resilience of the people living in the camps. It is called *Adashe* in the Hausa language. SILK is well organized and well programmed. It is made up of 25 members and a committee, comprising the treasurer, the chairman, three stakeholders and the secretary.



SILK started in Nigeria's northeast, and we brought it down to the camp to support people here financially. We meet every Friday, and the minimum contribution is 200 nairas (50 cents), while the highest contribution is 500 naira. The initiative is vital because it helps to support people financially. Every six months we open the boxes and distribute the money according to one's contribution. And when someone urgently needs cash, we lend them the money to solve their immediate need and they can pay it back afterwards. Through this initiative, most participants can eat at least twice a day, while some can afford to do farming, run a small business and send their children to school. They also learn to save for the future and, most importantly, the process helps them forget the past.



| 9 Christiana James, 23

I am Christiana James. I live in the Polo camp, in Maiduguri, with my mother and siblings. I lost my father at the hands of Boko Haram. They attacked my village and destroyed lives and properties. I was in school when the attack happened, but they also came to our school, and killed some children. Thank God I survived. On reaching my house, I discovered Boko Haram had killed my father, which made me very sad. Things were not the same after the death of my father, things became very hard.

I stopped my schooling and we could not afford a square meal, or to wear decent dresses. We had no choice, so we left for Maiduguri. On our way to Maiduguri, Boko Haram abducted us, and kept us for three days without food. They were planning to take us to the Sambisa Forest, but God was merciful, and we escaped and came to



Maiduguri, in search of a place to live, ending up in the camp. I feel so blessed to be one of the beneficiaries of Aid to the Church in Need. I was very excited when the Bishop of Maiduguri welcomed us, and when he learned that I am was no longer going to school he helped my mother enrol me in one of the best mission schools, St. Hilary primary and secondary school, in Maiduguri.

After my junior year I was enrolled in Our Lady's secondary school at the cathedral, thanks to the support that ACN gave to help the widows in Maiduguri. I just graduated from secondary school and hope to further my education in the nearest future. I can read, write and speak English, all thanks to ACN. We eat three times a day because ACN made that possible. All our medical expenses are taken care of as well. We cannot complain, almost everything we need is covered. My gratitude goes out to Bishop Doeme and to ACN. I promise to study hard, and become someone great in the future, so that you all will be proud of me.

The Maiduguri Diocese Trauma Centre in Maiduguri was built with financial assistance of Aid to the Church in Need. Aimed at helping people who have suffered various forms of violence at the hands of Boko Haram, the centre officially opened in November 2022, although by that time it had already helped more than 20 people overcome severe cases of trauma, and post-traumatic stress, as well as offering counselling and vocational training to victims. The centre already employs a team of 24 people who work on counselling and social integration, but there are plans for another 20 staff members. At its peak capacity, the Trauma Centre will be able to cater for 40 victims at a time.





II VICTIMS OF FULANI HERDSMEN ARMED GROUPS

This conflict is probably the most serious for Nigeria at the moment, since it has resulted in more deaths than those caused by Boko Haram in recent years. It is also one of the most complicated, as it mixes struggles for resources with political, religious and ethnic elements. For this reason, this report devotes more space to it than to the other conflicts.

The roots of this conflict are as old as human history. Access to land and to pasture has been a challenge between nomads and settled communities, and has traditionally been governed by a delicate balance based on agreements about paths and roads to use. Originally, the conflict had nothing to do with religion or ethnicity. Lack of natural resources, increasingly dry land, population growth, the need for more farming space, lack of water, but also an increase in cattle population has broken the balance. Also, the fact that clashes used to be fought with spears and arrows, while today some herders are armed with modern weapons, plays a sad roll in the dimension of the conflict.

There are between 12-16 million Fulani in Nigeria (6%-8% of the population), but not all are nomads. According to reports given to ACN during research trips, most of the Fulani causing problems in Nigeria seem to be originally from neighbouring countries.

The pastoral Fulani are predominantly Muslim, but there is also a small and significant Fulani Christian minority. Even if today the Fulani do not control any state, it is very important to understand the role of the Fulani in the breakthrough of Islam in West Africa and the fear of Christians until today. This is a factor that feeds fear and reminds Christians and non-Muslims of the dark old times of slavery and forced conversion.

It is difficult to know how much Islamic ideology and “jihad” play a role in the acts of violence. Is there a jihadist message and a further incentive to expand their areas of control through the herders? This is difficult to ascertain, but ACN partners speak about a “hidden agenda” because the fact is that they have invaded the lands of predominantly Christian farmers, murdering, raping and injuring, and ravaging villages and towns, and in so doing provoking a mass departure of Christians who see their lives and farms in danger.



“I just want to close my eyes and stop this nightmare”

10 BLESSING UKERTOR (20)

On November 29, 2022, Blessing Ukertor, 20, survived a Fulani herdsmen attack on her village of Yeluwata. Both of her parents were killed in the attack, and Blessing is still in the hospital recovering from wounds to her hand and leg. She spoke with Aid to the Church in Need about her ordeal.

What happened to you?

November 29, 2022, was a dark day for me and my family. When I woke up, my father wanted us to go to the farm to harvest yams. I was reluctant, I never wanted to go to the farm, so I came up with an excuse, saying I had to cook for the family. But my father insisted, saying that it would not take long, since half of the work had been done the day before. Grudgingly, I went.

We started working, and we were rushing to finish before 8am. I was clearing the bushes on the farm, while the others were digging out the yams, when I heard my mother scream. I turned to see what was going on, and found we were surrounded by Fulani herdsmen. There were six of them. One of them had a gun in his hand, the others had machetes. I was terrified, and I said to myself: “This is how my entire family will be wiped off the face of the earth.”



They were so close that we couldn't run far before getting caught. One of the men took his machete and cut off my mother's head. Her blood splashed on my face, and I screamed. I had never experienced this kind of thing. It's something you hear about on the news or in a movie. I watched someone take my mother's life. I was standing right there, but could not do anything. My chest hurt, it felt so heavy, as though it were a large stone.

My father gave me a sign, to run while he distracted them. I immediately fell to the ground to crawl away. But just as I stood up, believing that I had escaped, one of the Fulanis pointed a gun at me and said: "You think you are smart, right? Get back or I waste you, just like your mum". I obeyed.

For the first time in my life, I saw my father helpless and crying. One of the men, holding a machete and a gun, asked my father: "Which do you prefer, to die by gun or machete?" My father was afraid to answer, so the same herdsman said: "I gave you a choice, but you abused it by not saying anything. Well, rest in peace." On saying that, he shot my father. My heart could not take in this act of sickness. I knelt and started pleading for mercy. They beat me up, using a machete on my hand, leg and head. That is all I can remember. When I woke up, I found myself in the hospital.

Will you live in a camp for Internally Displaced People?

After my treatment in the hospital, I will go and settle in a camp.

A priest and members of the Church have visited me here several times. They prayed for me and brought me food. My hospital bill was covered by the Red Cross, and the Church helped with my parents' burial. I am grateful.

What are your prospects for the future?

I can't say now. Life to me is meaningless. I just want to close my eyes, open them, and stop this nightmare. I want to be healed and stand on my own feet. I crave for justice for Clement and Christiana Ukertor, my parents. I wish to forget the torture and the humiliation I have been through. But I will take each day as it comes. Above all, I wish that these attacks would end, so we can live in peace with each other, go back to our homes, and carry on with our lives.

Do you envision a return to farming? If so, where?

Not at all. Farming to make money is good, but money does not bring back life. I want to be able to enjoy freedom and peace of mind.

Has your faith been a source of strength for you?

On the one hand, I am angry with God for doing nothing to stop this tragedy from happening. But on the other, He is still God, and I cannot question Him. For that, may His name be praised.

Can you consider forgiving your attackers?

This just happened a few weeks ago. Everything is still fresh. With the way I am feeling now, perhaps I would consider forgiving them in the future, but this attack created a huge hunger for revenge! It has poisoned my heart. I am tired of running. I am ready to face my fear.



Clement saw his mother, brother and son murdered by Fulani herdsmen

11 CLEMENT USOO (65)

Clement Usoo, 65, is from Tse-Umande Village in Nigeria. He lost his mother, brother, son and four other relatives in an attack by Fulani extremists on June 1, 2019, and was shot in the chest himself. Additionally, the Fulani herdsmen took his land and his town, forcing him to move to an IDP camp with his family. At the camp, three of his remaining nine children died, and six others were assigned housework in various cities.

What happened to you?

On that fateful day I was on my way to a farm near my house. My older brother happened to be at a farm opposite mine. Suddenly, we heard gunfire in the village. My brother and I stopped what we were doing and ran to our house. As we approached it, the sound of gunfire got closer and we could hear people screaming and crying.

People came running from every corner of the village. I wanted to save my mother and my oldest son, who were at home. Stepping into the house, I saw everything scattered about. I started calling out for them. My brother ran inside the hut while I went outside to see if I could find them. Then I heard my brother scream. I rushed inside and saw my son's head in one corner of the room and the rest of his body in the centre.

I was confused. I took his head and placed it on his body, shaking it, to see if God would have mercy and bring him back to life – but that never happened.



Just as I was about to run from the room, four Fulani herdsmen ambushed us. They grabbed me, and one of them shot me in the chest, while another slashed my hand with a machete. I was also stabbed in the back. They grabbed hold of my brother and mother, tormenting her and telling her to watch them slaughter her son. One of them had an AK47 and shot my brother, who died instantly. My mother could not hold back her pain, and collapsed.

On seeing that, I fell unconscious. The attackers thought I was dead, and left. Soon after, villagers began to collect all the dead bodies for a mass burial; that was when they found out I was still breathing. They rushed me to the hospital, where I spent a few months. When I was discharged, I was told that four more of my relatives had been killed by Fulani herdsmen. Meanwhile, all the villagers made their way to the camps for safety. My wife and I joined them in Guma Camp, but in 2021 she died because of the hardship in the camp and all the trauma she had experienced. Today, my village of Tse-Umande is still occupied by Fulani herdsmen.

Is this the first time you were confronted with Fulani violence?

Fulani attacks on farmers in Nigeria are too numerous to be counted. And the most upsetting thing is that the government is not doing anything to stop the attacks. It almost seems as if there is a plan to kill all the Christians here.

Has there ever been harmony between Christian farmers and Fulani herders?

Yes, there were times when we lived in peace.

What kind of services does the Church provide in the camp?

The Church helped me recover, though I am not as happy as I was in my village. Whenever I remember the loved ones I lost, it is very hard. My son was my breadwinner, and he is gone. I always feel sad. But despite it all, I am thankful to be alive. I get help from various people.

What are your prospects for the future?

I am very old now, and my strength is gone. I can do little until I finally join my ancestors. I just wish to spend the remaining days of my life in happiness, with food on my table, in good health, preparing to rest in Christ.

Has your faith been a source of strength for you?

To be honest, no. After that day, I stopped participating in Church activities. I also stopped going to Mass for some time. I stopped praying and believing in God. I lived like a pagan for a long time, but I am glad that I am now able to let go of my past and come back to God.



Ember lost her husband and suffered permanent injury at the hands of Fulani herdsmen

12 Ember Amee (20)

On October 26, 2021, Fulani herdsmen killed 20-year-old Ember Amee's husband. She was pregnant at the time that she found her husband in a pool of his own blood. Despite her pregnancy, the Fulani herdsmen attacked her, too. A machete struck her shoulder, back, and head, and she lost three fingers. She and her baby only survived because she pretended to be dead. As a result of this violence, Ember's mental health is permanently impaired, she suffers from manic episodes and is stigmatised by her community.

Can you tell us more about the day you lost your husband?

October 26, 2021, is a day I am trying to forget. That day my husband and I were farming close to our village. I was heavily pregnant then. My husband noticed I was sad and asked what was wrong. I answered that I didn't know but that I was feeling sad and uneasy, and confused in my thoughts. I felt as if I was about to lose something dear to me. I could not understand the feeling. A few minutes later I told my husband that I was going to get water. He kissed me goodbye and told me not to be away long. I replied with a smile, not knowing that that would be the last time I would hear his voice or see him.

When I returned, I couldn't find him. I looked around, but there was no sign of him anywhere on the farm. Tense and worried, I started calling out his name. Suddenly, I heard a response from the other end of the farm. I called out again and I got a response again, but it did not sound like my hus-



band. I began to wonder what had happened to him.

I walked toward the voice, though I was not fully convinced it was my husband, I was determined to go and see what was happening. When I got there, I saw my him lying on the ground, lifeless, murdered in cold blood. His corpse was surrounded by eight Fulani herdsmen.

It was like my heart stopped beating, and there were goosebumps all over my body. I thought of my pregnancy and cried my heart out. I was in a lot of pain. When I saw them coming toward me, I began to run, but I slipped and fell.

One of them aimed his machete at my stomach, but I used my hands and head to shield my child. I felt a cut on my shoulder, and it was so painful that I couldn't even scream. I used my left hand to try to stop the blood, but one of them cut off three of my fingers.

The pain I felt cannot be compared to anything. I felt another cut at the back of my head and I felt dizzy. One of them raised his arm to stab me, but I pretended to be dead. That was what saved me. I heard one of them saying "Let's leave, they are dead already!" After they left, a villager, who had been watching from a hiding place, rushed me to the hospital. I can't thank God enough for keeping my baby safe in the womb and for sparing my life.

Nowadays I easily forget things, and sometimes I act crazy. However, I am still grateful to God for keeping me alive and I have learned to adjust and deal with this likely lifelong trauma.

Is this the first time you were confronted with Fulani violence?

No, nor was it the last. There has been a series of attacks on my village, and I have lost count of how many times we were attacked. They are still at it, and no one stops them.

Has there ever been harmony between Christian farmers and Fulani herders?

Not that I know of. We have always had a cat-and-dog relationship. We Christian farmers have extended our hands in friendship to the Fulani herdsmen several times, but they keep breaking

our trust by betraying and killing us. We are very tired of this.

Are you living in a camp for Internally Displaced People?

Yes, I just moved to the Ortese IDP Camp in Benue State. After the attack I stayed in one of the neighboring villages, but recently that community was also attacked. Then I went to the diocese, and they took care of me for some days before moving me to the camp. I cannot go back to my village because it is now dominated by Fulani herdsmen.

What kind of services is the Church providing?

The Church has been doing what it can. They bring us food, clothes, and toiletries, and strengthen our faith through prayers, and they celebrate Mass for us.

What are your prospects for the future?

I am currently learning how to make dresses. I am hopeful that when I am done I will be able to set up shop and provide for my son Myton and myself.

Do you envision a return to farming?

I love farming, but now that I am handicapped I am not certain I will be able to farm again. My left hand cannot function properly because of the cut I incurred in the attack.

Has your faith been a source of strength for you?

My faith has kept me going; it is the reason I am alive. I am pushing on, despite my situation. I still trust God, regardless of what I have been through, and I am hoping for the best soon.

Can you contemplate forgiving your attackers?

Yes, I will forgive them. As Christians, we are taught to forgive those who trespass against us so that we may also be forgiven. So, I have forgiven them for the pain they have inflicted on me.



Fulani killed her husband and rubbed his blood over her body as a warning

13 Msepera Ujam (40)

Msepera Ujam is a 40-year-old mother of 11. She lost her husband on April 1, 2022, when Fulani herdsmen attacked their farm. The violence occurred when her husband refused to let the herdsmen cross their land.

What happened to you?

On the evening of April 1, 2022, we were working at the farm. The herdsmen came in great numbers and insisted on passing through our freshly grown crops. When my husband refused and asked politely that they pass elsewhere, a fight broke out. We saw them take out their weapons, so I took my husband's hand, and we ran back home to save our lives. But the same people later attacked us. We had just finished dinner, and since it was hot, we decided to sit in the backyard and get some fresh air, when the herdsmen entered our compound.

We ran towards a nearby settlement called Yogbo, but before we could get there, we were caught by the herdsmen, who shot my husband. I reached out for our children, whom my husband was carrying before he got shot, but I couldn't move, I was frozen. One of the herdsmen mocked me, saying: "At the farm, your mouth was so sharp. Suddenly,



now you are dumb!” He took two large leaves and used them to rub my husband’s blood all over my body, from my feet to my forehead. Then he instructed me to tell the villagers what they had done to my husband.

I walked with my children all through the night, until we got to the Ortese camp the next morning. Later that day, some members of our community were brave enough to collect my husband’s corpse so he could have a proper burial. Since then, I have lived here. The camp is no bed of roses, we are human beings and we step on each other’s toes, but we try to live in peace. When there is a fight, camp officials intervene, and things are settled amicably. I am grateful that my children and I survived the attack.

Is this the first time you were confronted with Fulani violence?

Attacks happen every day. If the government or non-governmental organizations do not interfere, in the next few months, we will all be killed, and Benue will be an Islamic state.

Has there ever been harmony between Christian farmers and Fulani herders?

No. But we don’t discriminate against them. We even welcome them onto our land, and we sometimes give them food from our harvested crops.

What kind of services is the Church providing?

The Church always comes to check on us, and that strengthens my faith and makes me feel that I am not alone. There are still people who care for us. Apart from that, the Church provides us with food and shelter, and organizes fun activities, like dancing, to help us forget about the past. And some of us have been able to acquire skills, like making shoes, sewing, catering, and so on. I have learned how to bake cakes, for example, which will help me in the future. I am grateful to God for using the Church to bless us in different ways.

What are your prospects for the future?

I have learned new skills, but I am a farmer by birth. It’s not easy to just forget about farming. I want to go back to it, if possible. Farming is my life. The few months that I have spent in the camp without it have been miserable. If you give me land to farm, you will be amazed by my produce. I would love to farm on land that is safe and close to town.

Has your faith been a source of strength for you?

It does strengthen me. I have become very conscious of my worship. I take full advantage of the Church activities that I took for granted before the attack.

Can you consider forgiving your attackers?

Honestly, I can’t say. One side of me wants to forgive and forget, the other side wants revenge. The humiliation of seeing my husband killed and having his blood rubbed all over my body is something that I can’t forget. Any time I think about it, I cry and think of revenge.



14 MARTINA KUMAIIN (50)

My name is Martina Kumaiin. I come from Makurdi, Nigeria. In March 2018 my neighbor was attacked by Fulani men and lost four family members. My son volunteered to help bring the corpses to a proper burial site, and at the site, he was also killed. I didn't realize this at first, I just wondered what was keeping him. My neighbour suggested we search for him, and when we got there we found five corpses, not four. I was shaking. The fifth body was my son, whose only crime was to volunteer. Why did it have to be him? He was innocent! He did not deserve to die. He had a future, but everything is over now. Since that ugly day, I have not had a minute of sound sleep. It's a struggle every blessed day. My son was a good man. He would go to any length to help whoever needed assistance. He provided for us and made sure that we never lacked anything. Now that he is not here, everything is different, and we struggle to make ends meet. But I thank God that I am alive, and I thank God for taking care of us. I pray that my son's sacrifice was not in vain.



15 ROSEMARY UDOJI (30)

My name is Rosemary Udoji, and I am from Makurdi, Nigeria. On March 4, 2018, my husband and I were coming back from the farm, and we started hearing gunshots. Before we could run, the herdsmen had us surrounded. I was told not to shout. One of the herdsmen said they were not interested in killing the women, that they were there only for the men, including any male children. My husband, my oldest son, and my brother in-law were hiding inside the house. The Fulanis asked to see the men, but I lied and told them that no one was home, that the men were not back from the farm yet. But fear got the best of me, and the herdsmen could tell I was lying. I kept insisting that the men had not come back from the farm, and one of the herdsmen pounced on me and started beating me up. I was carrying my son, but they forcefully took my child from my hands and asked what sex the baby was. I lied and said he was a girl, but again, they knew I was lying. They threw my son at me and rushed inside the house, where they found my husband, his brother, and my oldest son. They shot my brother-in-law and he fell and died instantly. He had just finished high school and was waiting to hear about college admission, and just like that he was killed. What a waste of a life. My husband was also shot, and he fell to the ground. The herdsmen thought he was dead, and they left. He and my son both survived, but my son was shot in the chest, and a bullet remains lodged there, we have no money to remove it, and he is always complaining of severe chest pain. That day the Fulanis killed three other people and left many injured. As a result of the attack, I developed a myocardial infection. We were left with nothing, and we can't do much for ourselves.





16 NGBEER VERONICA (40)

My name is Ngebeer Veronica, and I come from Guma, Nigeria. I am blessed with eight children. Everything happened to us in the blink of an eye. On a beautiful evening, 26 October 2020, we were preparing the burial of a church elder, when suddenly herdsmen attacked us, and we ran for our lives. My husband and his brother were in the compound, having a glass of wine, and the Fulanis caught them and slaughtered them like animals. At that point, I could not run any more. I turned around and told the herdsmen to take my life too. Since they had killed my husband, what would I be living for? But they left without harming me. I stayed with the corpses until the next day, crying for help that never came.

I was shocked to see familiar faces among the herdsmen. I recognised two of the men, Sally and Umalu, who were my next-door neighbours. We ate together, we lived a peaceful, communal life. My husband gave them land to provide for themselves and their families. When I saw them, I screamed out their names. I still can't believe that they would be capable of killing my husband, with all that we have done for them. We treated them like family, and this is how they repay us? My husband and I were dining with the devil. Indeed, you can trust no one. Not only did they take my husband from me, but they also took his phone and his motorcycle, and they set our house on fire. I watched them do all this, and I was helpless. I couldn't do anything. After my husband's burial, I stayed at a camp in Makurdi. The Church has helped many of us acquire basic skills, like sewing, welding and plumbing. I learned how to make dresses, and I will be glad to finally own a sewing machine that will lessen my hardship. The Church also comes to check on us and brings us food and clothing. I will never doubt God's plan for me. My faith is not weakened by all this. I will never forget what happened, but I have forgiven the herdsmen for what they did to me. God allowed it, and I hold no grudge against them.





17 COMFORT FAASEMA

My name is Comfort Faasema and I am from Makurdi, Nigeria. My family and I came to the Ortese camp in 2021 after a Fulani attack. But things had become so difficult at the camp that we decided to return to our village and farm. Once back at the farm, during harvest season, we encountered Fulani herdsmen again, and we immediately ran for our lives. They caught up with us and killed my husband. When I saw that, I stopped running. I went to one of the herdsmen and held on to his leg, begging him to kill me, too, but he pushed me away, saying that they only care about killing men. They left me there, and I cried for hours. At some point, I returned to the camp, leaving my husband's body after covering it with leaves. Camp residents later helped with the burial.

The core need in the camp is food – we are nearly dying of hunger, and we don't know how to feed our families. Every day is a struggle. But the Church has been helpful, and I thank God for it.



18 ALEXANDER AKUR (65)

My name is Alexander Akura, and I am from Guma, Nigeria. I am married, and have seven children. On 30 August 2022, Fulani herdsmen attacked my village and killed many people. I was lucky to survive. I still can't explain how I was saved. We were sitting outside the house on a cold evening, having dinner with my family, when herdsmen attacked and began firing their weapons indiscriminately. I ran with my family to a safe place. After things calmed down, my family and I walked through the night to find refuge at the Ortese camp. The hardship in the camp is severe, there's no food to eat, but our farms have been taken over by herdsmen, and going back home would get us killed. We eat to stay alive, not to be satisfied, because our meals lack flavor and the nutrients to keep us healthy. However, the whole experience has increased my faith in God, and I am grateful that we made it out alive. Only God could have made that happen.





A PRIEST RECOUNTS HIS KIDNAPPING BY FULANI HERDSMEN



Kidnappings are a hallmark of terrorist organisations in Nigeria, including Boko Haram and Islamic State-West Africa Province, and clergy are increasingly being targeted. For more than a month in Spring 2021, Fr Bako Francis Awesuh, priest at St. John Paul II parish in Gadanaji, Kachia local government area, in Kaduna state, was held captive by Muslim Fulani herdsmen, who stand accused of deadly attacks on Christian farmers along Nigeria's Middle Belt. Father Awesuh described his ordeal in a recent interview with Aid to the Church in Need.

19 Fr Bako Francis Awesuh (37)

It happened 16 May, at exactly 11pm. I heard gunshots and I quickly turned off the television set. Turning off the light, I saw shadows and heard footsteps. I carefully opened the curtain to see what was going on. I saw five bulky Fulani herdsmen who were well-armed, I recognised them by their dress and by the way they spoke. I stood there confused, not knowing what to do, as I felt completely lost. There was a knock on the door. My legs went cold and my body stiff. I was sweating profusely.

They kept on knocking, but, afraid, I refused to open the door. They broke down the door and forced themselves inside. One of the men pushed me to the floor, tied me up and flogged me mercilessly, saying *ka ki ka bude mana kofa da tsori* ("you are getting tortured because you kept us standing outside for so long and refused to open the door when we were knocking"). They stripped me naked down to my shorts.

Together with ten of my parishioners, we were kidnapped. We trekked for three days in the bush with no food or water, being fed only on mangos. We were hungry, tired, weak, our legs hurt a lot and our feet were swollen as we trekked barefoot.

There was rain on the second and third days, but we had to keep moving.

On the third day, we arrived at a camp deep in the forest. In that camp, there was a small hut where they kept us. On arrival, we were served rice with oil and salt, like prisoners. That was our food routine throughout our stay in the bush. The women who were kidnapped along with me were doing the cooking. We spent one month and five days in the bush.

We were not allowed to bathe throughout our captivity. We had to urinate and defecate in the hut. We were smelling like dead bodies and the hut smelled like a mortuary.

We were tortured and threatened with death if a ransom of 50 million naira (about \$120,000) was not paid. A call was made to our families to pay the ransom in exchange for our lives. Our families pleaded and negotiated with our kidnappers, until they finally accepted the sum of seven million naira (\$17,000).

Meanwhile some of my parishioners had tried to rescue us from the kidnappers. Three people lost their lives in the process: Jeremiah Madaki, Ever-



est Yero, our parish secretary, and an elderly man. They had tracked us down.

Oh, what sorrow to have watched three of my parishioners shot dead in cold blood, right before my eyes -and I couldn't do anything. It was very painful! At this point, I felt helpless, hopeless, useless, and restless! I urgently craved for death to take me, as the scene of the killings kept playing in my head. I couldn't pray because of the shock I was in. Whenever I opened my mouth to pray, words failed me. All I could say was "Lord, have mercy."

Finally, our families were able to pay the ransom, and, to the greater glory of God's name, we were released and came out alive. I narrowly escaped death. I know of so many priests kidnapped before and after me who were killed even after a ransom was paid.

Afterwards I was traumatised and underwent counselling; I also spent some time in hospital. Today, I am still in hiding, for security reasons, and to fully recover. The love I received and experienced from my family, friends and especially the Church, was enormous.

Fulani attacks have become very common in Kaduna state. I am therefore calling on the international community to please come to our rescue.



Aid to the Church in Need supports the work of the Diocese of Makurdi, Nigeria, in providing aid to Internally Displaced People in 14 camps and in 13 host communities. Besides pastoral care, the local Church provides trauma counselling, scholarships so that children can continue their education, as well as food and other forms of humanitarian aid. **In 2022, Fulani herdsmen attacked 99 villages in Benue State, killing 351 farmers.**



III VICTIMS OF THE PENTECOST MASSACRE

After the deadly attack on St Francis Xavier Church in Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria, on Pentecost Sunday, Aid to the Church in Need met survivors in Owo's St. Louis hospital and in the Federal Medical Centre. The massacre took place in the southwest of Nigeria, a place that hasn't been affected until now by the insecurity and violence which generally affect the north and the Middle Belt.

The Pentecost Sunday Massacre in Owo shows how these lines are often blurred. Nigerian authorities blame the Islamic State and other Islamic terrorist groups while the local population believes Fulani herdsmen played a role in the attack.

In other cases of terrorist attacks, media shared stories and information for several days. In the case of this massacre in southwest Nigeria, only a number – 39 people killed more than 80 injured – seems to have remained. But behind the number are stories, and ACN wants to share some of the testimonies of survivors of that fatal day of the massacre, as well as their fears and hopes in the aftermath.



In wake of the Pentecost massacre, Nigerian priest calls “on anybody who can, to assist us with the investigation on the ground” to discover the truth.

| 20 FR AUGUSTINE IKWU

Fr Augustine Ikwu, director of Social Communications for the diocese, speaks about the state of the wounded and how the local Church is doing everything it can to avoid further violence.

Exactly how many people were killed or wounded in the attack which took place last Sunday?

We have 38 already in the mortuary: five children, a girl and four boys; two teenagers, a girl and a boy; twelve adult men and nineteen adult women. We are still trying to account for the names of those who are in the hospital. We have many names already, but some were taken to private hospitals, so we are trying to contact the families of every person who was in the church that day, to account for everybody. Also, we are calling on anybody who took charge of the bodies of their family members to contact us. Therefore, we will not be able to provide definitive numbers.

What is the condition of the wounded? Could the death toll still rise?

I was in the hospital yesterday, and I saw the ones who were there. They are relatively stable, except for a few who are critically injured. The doctors are doing a great job, and I hope they will survive, with God’s grace, our prayers and the efforts of the medical personnel.

**Is there a history of conflict in the state? Of violence by Islamic militants, or by Fulani herdsmen?**

This has generally been a peaceful state. Occasionally there are hiccups, but they are not serious situations. It is really a peaceful state, and it is hard to believe that local Muslims would do something like this. There has always been a clear division between northern and southern Muslims. The Muslims who live in our region are relatively peaceful, and they have been coming out publicly to condemn this atrocity. So we cannot simply attach this to them.

What are the main needs of the diocese at the moment?

It is a difficult time for us, and we would call on the entire world to hold us in their prayers, to pray for the deceased, the injured and their families in the diocese. We started a novena today, and we are calling on everybody to join us in this.

We also call on anybody who can to assist us with investigations on the ground. But we would also call on the world to be conscious of the state of insecurity, not only in our state now, but in the entire country, because insecurity has literally taken over the country at this point. And if I could say anything to the current government, I would say that it is not dishonourable to step down when you are faced with a situation that you cannot handle. If the country has become ungovernable, it should be honourable to step down and leave room for somebody to step in, who might be able to handle it better. We must not allow greed to lead us.

Are you worried that the Christian community might try and seek revenge on alleged culprits for what has happened?

The bishop has continued to appeal to the public to be peaceful, law abiding and not take justice into its own hands. Nobody should go out to commit evil in return for evil. That is not the Christian way of life at all. Even in these situations, we answer evil with peace. This is easy to say, but difficult to practice, but in the long run we discover that this is better for society.

We have hope in God. We are like the three companions in the Old Testament who were thrown into the furnace. They said "If our God cannot save us, then let us perish in the furnace", and God did save them. So maybe this is also a challenge to God, people are calling upon him at this point, because they really cannot control the situation. We hope that He will help, we believe He will, but we are afraid. People might want to take matters into their own hands because a lot of people just don't care anymore. So we have made appeals to the general public to avoid this, and not cause any more harm.



21 Blessing John (36)

It was indeed a terrible experience that I do not wish even my enemies to go through. The priest was about to finish the Mass, and I was seated in the middle row of the church. At first, I thought it was a police siren that was passing, when I heard the shouts drawing closer. Parishioners started running towards the altar to enter the sacristy, but I couldn't run that far, as I am 7 months pregnant. I decided to go to the Divine Mercy chapel, but there were a lot of people running in that direction. I didn't know what to do, so I decided to lay on top of parishioners who were already down. As I was lying there, one of the gunmen threw a tiny light close to me.

It immediately registered in my head that it could be dynamite, so I started dragging myself away for safety, but before I could go far, the dynamite exploded and burned my back and my left leg. I couldn't cry or feel any pain at that point, though, but blood was gushing from my wounds. I opened my mouth and said, "Father, I came to worship at your temple, and this happened. If I perish, I perish, but please God remember me and my little daughter in your Kingdom". I am glad that I am alive, and my unborn baby is alive and healthy, but I was also told that my three-year-old daughter, who I thought was dead, is also alive, though she was terribly injured in the attack, and is at the Federal Medical Centre. Please keep us in your prayers for a quick recovery, so that I can reunite with my daughter and family.



22 Thaddeus Bade Salau (52)

I was in church when the incident happened. I was lying down on the ground until one of the gunmen had me stand up along with nine other parishioners, including my beautiful daughter. They shot all of us, one after the other. I was the last to be shot, and I was hit in the cheek. I was the only person out of the ten who survived. It was indeed something I can never forget. It was painful that I lost my beautiful daughter during the attack -but my faith is not shaken by that. This attack really strengthened my faith in God. I am glad that I am still alive, and I call on the international community to keep us in your prayers for a quick recovery, and to support us with material and financial aid.



23 Emmanuel Igwe (35)

I was in church when the ugly incident happened but, before I go further, I want to thank God that it is not more than this, as some of us were saved, though others were badly injured. May the souls of those who died rest in peace, and may God comfort us as a church, and all their families. The gunmen's intention was to come inside the church and make sure that no one was saved. They wanted to come quietly and carry out their evil intention, but I thank God for intervening in our favour. We had already received the final blessings and were waiting for the priest and the altar servers' procession when we heard the first shot. I went outside the church, thinking it was a case of a fight involving armed robbers, or between thieves and soldiers, but as I saw them running towards the church, I realized it was something else. I quickly ran to back of the church, and I told the parishioners to go back inside and lay down flat on the ground. Initially, I wanted to leave through another door, but I saw many people had been killed there already. I was scared, and confused, and tired of running. I decided to also lay down flat on the ground and as I was about to get up, they threw their first stick of dynamite, everything was shaking. The second stick of dynamite was thrown close to where I was lying down. Many people died beside me, but God gave me a second chance. This incident really upset me, I am angry within my spirit, but then, who am I to question God? This attack makes me strong in my faith, it draws me closer to God. I am alive, and none of my family members were killed. Thank God for that”.





| 24 Josephine Ejelonu (50)

I was inside the church when the incident happened. When I heard the first shot, I thought it was a toy gun. I turned around and saw people running. I didn't know where to run, so I laid down on people who were already dead, pretending to be dead also. I was still on the ground when they threw the first stick of dynamite very close to my legs. That was how the flesh of my legs was torn to pieces, and my bones were visible. In that state of turmoil and agony, I saw one of the gunmen coming towards me. I dragged myself out of the church and jumped through the fence. That was how I was saved. I saw some of the gunmen; one of them wore a yellow shirt, blue jeans, and a black face mask, while another wore a red top, black jeans, and red face mask. They were the ones throwing the sticks of dynamite. I just want to thank God for sparing my life and that of my family. I am calling on the international community to always remember us please, in your prayers and, also, we are in desperate need of financial assistance. I am sad and angry that innocent souls were killed. To be honest, going back to church will be very scary for me. This attack was a shock also for my faith, but I pray for more grace and strength to continue to be steadfast.



| 25 Sunday Vincent (5)

I was in church with my parents when the attack happened. I was confused, afraid and cried throughout the attack. I thought my mummy and daddy were dead but when I was in the hospital, I saw them alive and that made me so happy. I don't want to go to church again, because if I do, I might be killed.



| 26 Okorie Faith (9)

I am just a little girl with a dream of becoming a nun. All I ask is to be alive and fulfil my dreams. Am I asking too much? But I am not sure if I will be able to continue going to church for now, because it was when I went to church to worship God that I was shot. I don't want to die. I narrowly escaped death. I want to live long, to fulfil my dreams and to make my parents proud. I thank God for sparing my life. Always keep us in your prayers.



ACN will support the rebuilding of the church and the erection of a memorial for the victims of the terrorist attack on St. Francis in Owo town.



PRAYER FOR NIGERIA

All powerful and merciful Father, You are the God of Justice, Love and Peace.

You rule over all Nations on the earth. Power and Might are in Your hands and no one can withstand you.

We present our country Nigeria before You. We praise and thank You for You are the source of all we have and are. We are sorry for all the sins we have committed and for the good deeds we failed to do.

In Your loving forgiveness, keep us safe from the punishments we deserve. Lord, we are weighed down not only by uncertainties, but also by moral, economic, and political problems. Listen to the cries of your people who confidently turn to you. God of infinite goodness, our strength in adversity, our health in weakness, our comfort in sorrow, be merciful to us our people. Spare this nation Nigeria from chaos, anarchy and doom.

Bless us with your kingdom of Justice, Love and Peace.

We ask this through Christ our Lord,

Amen

Our Lady Queen of Nigeria, pray for us.



Aid to the
Church in Need

ACN INTERNATIONAL