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BOKO HARAM RAMPS UP VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

In 2013, the U.S. State Department designated Boko Haram and its more radical splinter group, Ansaru, as Foreign Terrorist Organizations. Both extremist movements claim ties to Islam that are repudiated by mainstream Muslim organizations. Boko Haram, whose name translates into “Western education is sinful,” aims to establish an Islamic state in Nigeria. To do so, they have stepped up their attacks against Nigerian government offices, media, educational and religious institutions, both Muslim and Christian. Ansaru seems to target Christian churches. The Nigerian government appears unable to control the violence and is slow to address the underlying issues feeding it.

2013 was a particularly bloody year. Boko Haram militants murdered scores of students and teachers, including some sleeping in their dormitory. Armed with powerful weapons, riding in trucks, and sometimes wearing military garb, some 500 militants overran a military base in December. In February 2014, Boko Haram militants killed over 120 people in a predominantly Christian village in northeastern Nigeria.

Possible ties to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) mean that violence is likely to escalate and could spread to neighboring countries. In the past, a number of Christian churches have been targeted, including bombings of a Catholic church on Christmas Day and a Protestant church at Easter, killing many parishioners and wounding dozens. Boko Haram has also targeted Nigerian Muslims who they accuse of being too secular or moderate. Religious institutions are not their only targets. In 2012, the movement attacked a building housing Nigeria’s major daily newspaper and two other newspapers, ostensibly because of what they viewed as inaccuracy in media reporting. With gunshots and blasts directed at schools, students are afraid to

continue their education. Police and military have also been targeted. It is estimated that Boko Haram is responsible for the deaths of over 1,200 people since 2009.

Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa and the seventh most populous in the world. Its over 170 million people are roughly evenly divided between Christians and Muslims. Emerging from a colonial past in 1960, ethnic and religious allegiances remain strong, and have been exploited to provoke violence and conflict. Nigeria is the twelfth largest producer of oil in the world, but disputes, sometimes violent, over who controls and benefits from the sale of oil has increased tensions. Although Nigeria has a per capita income of more than \$2,700, 70 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. In fact, oil wealth has fueled rampant corruption. Inequality and corruption are exploited by extremists in gaining sympathizers and recruits. The government struggles to take action, but is often seen as unresponsive. The targeted attacks by Boko Haram aim to fuel sectarian sentiments and provoke religious conflict.

The Catholic Church is a major public presence in Nigeria and has worked to calm religious tensions. The President of the Nigerian Bishops’ Conference decried the violence, saying the “authorities have so far failed to fulfill their task of ensuring peace and security to Nigerians in every area of the country.” He called for policy makers and the military to “go to the root of the phenomenon.” Christian and Muslim religious leaders have a strong history of working together for mutual respect and tolerance. The Church in Nigeria is working with the Muslim community to strengthen governance, reduce corruption and marginalize extremists. Protection of religious freedom is integral to forming an inclusive society respectful of the human rights of all.