

GENERAL SYNOD

Recent violence in Nigeria

In view of the recent serious violence in Nigeria the Bishop of Durham travelled to the country at short notice on behalf of the Archbishop of Canterbury to meet members of the Anglican Church in Nigeria and others caught up in the deteriorating situation there.

Following the Bishop's return we have decided, in the exercise of our powers under Standing Order 4 (b) in relation to urgent or other especially important business, to direct the addition to the agenda for the February Group of sessions of a short debate. This will enable the Synod to hear from the Bishop of Durham, to reflect on the attached briefing note and, if it agrees, to pass a short motion that the Bishop will move on our behalf in the following terms:

"That this Synod, gravely concerned at the desperate plight of Christian communities in parts of Nigeria as described in GS 1861, request the British Government to do all it can to support those in Nigeria seeking to protect religious minorities of all faiths and enable them to practise their religion without fear."

✘ Rowan Cantuar:

✘ Sentamu Ebor:

3 February 2012

Nigeria

Briefing Note for General Synod

Overview and Summary

1. Members of Synod will be aware from the news of the severe deterioration in Nigeria in recent months. The aim of this paper is to provide a summary background for those who may not have followed all the details, and to provide support for the Synod motion that I shall, with the Archbishops' agreement, be moving.
2. Since the April 2011 national elections, a low level campaign of violence by terrorist groups, especially one called Boko Haram (BH), in north eastern Nigeria has developed extensively, with the most severe incident being on Friday 20th January, when more than 200 people were killed by bombs and other means in the huge northern city of Kano.
3. At the same time, long standing disputes elsewhere in Nigeria, but especially in the middle belt of the country and the north, have continued to simmer with daily killings. Although many would argue as to whether religion is a principal, or only a contributory, cause of these disputes, they have increasingly assumed a religious aspect.
4. As a result Christian groups have been attacked, churches burned and large numbers of people killed, often with the utmost savagery. The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) is one of the most significant Christian churches in the country, with not far off 20 million active members, and has dioceses and parishes across the whole country. Many of its churches and people have been among those attacked, injured and killed.
5. The Primate, the Most Reverend Nicholas Okoh, has expressed appreciation of Church of England visits and support, as well as support from other Anglican Communion members, individuals and NGOs. He has publicly called for peace and the absence of retaliation, while maintaining the right of self-defence. A motion of support from the General Synod will be both emotionally helpful and also practically influence the attitudes of those on the ground.

Nigeria-General Background

6. Nigeria was created in 1914 under the leadership of the Governor-General Lord Lugard. It combined the two colonial administrations of north and south Nigeria, mainly for financial reasons.
7. The country is immensely complicated, and everything one says, however complex, must end with the statement "but it is not as simple as that". What is said below is thus over simplified for brevity.
8. Nigeria is a bringing together of three ancient powers, Yoruba in the south west, Igbo in the south east and Hausa in the northwest. However, it has at least 470 languages (the national language is English). Each major group has waxed and waned over time. The Hausa are mainly Muslim, the Igbos Christian and the Yoruba Christian with a significant and well integrated Muslim minority. However, in all areas there are ethnic

groups with local domination, some of them very significant. The total population is roughly 160-170 million, split roughly 50/50 Christian/Muslim. Over 20% of the population in Africa south of the Sahara is Nigerian. It is a country of vast contrasts, immense vigour, wonderful people, passionate faith, great dynamism and natural giftings. The oil is in the far south east (known in Nigeria as the South South).

9. Nigeria achieved independence from the UK in 1960. In 1966 a military coup overthrew the civilian, elected government, and following massacres of the south eastern Igbo people, a civil war broke out in 1967, in which they sought independence as Biafra. The war ended with their defeat in 1970, after not far short of 2 million deaths, and peace was re-established under General Gowon (himself a northerner from Jos, the capital of what is now Plateau state) with the slogan “no victor, no vanquished”
10. Following more coups, civilian rule was re-established in 1978, lasting until 1982. From then until 1999, the military were once more in charge, culminating in the tyrannical period of General Abacha. In 1999 President Obasanjo was elected with an essentially US type constitution of 36 states. Re-elected in 2003, he stood down as required in 2007, when the northern President Yar’ Adua, was elected, with Goodluck Jonathan, from the south south as Vice-President. President Yar’ Adua was in poor health, dying in 2010.
11. President Jonathan succeeded him, and went on to win the presidential election in 2011, with a Vice President from Kaduna in the middle belt/north. The elections were internationally recognised as fair and much less tainted than for many years. The north voted predominantly but by no means totally for General Buhari, the leading challenger, and the map of voting showed the boundary between mainly Jonathan and mainly Buhari, was never far from the pre 1914 division of northern and southern colonies.
12. Most Muslims in Nigeria are Sunni, with a Sufi influence, although there is a significant Shia element. Christians are divided with a very large Anglican church, an equally large Roman Catholic Church, significant reformed groups and an amazing diversity of Pentecostal churches. Nigeria is one of the most religious nations on earth.

Violence in Nigeria

13. Violence, as in Europe, has been endemic for many years, since well before the colonial period. In the early 19th century a jihad led by Dan Fodio, Sultan of Sokoto, in the far north west, swept through the Muslim areas, bringing renewal of Islam. It failed to conquer the north east, and did not penetrate beyond the middle belt going south. That being said, violence tended to be more ethnic or economic (the classic pastoralist/farmer conflicts) than religious. A recent description was that violence in Nigeria is like a pot cooking with three stones to rest on, ethnicity, economics and more recently religion.
14. The economy has failed to deliver jobs for the rapidly growing population, especially in the north, where poor transport, unreliable power sources and the overvaluation of the currency have ruined both industry and agriculture. As a result there are vast numbers of unemployed youth, who are easily recruited as foot soldiers by those set on violence.
15. Religious violence grew sharply in the 1980s, and from the late 1990s there have been very severe outbreaks (or crises) in a number of places, especially Jos in Plateau State, and Kaduna, both in the north middle, and also in the great city of Kano, as well as Maiduguri and Damaturu in the far north east. In the three last cases Igbo churches have

suffered disproportionately, as the Igbos trade extensively throughout the country. The crises have led to tens of thousands of deaths in the last decade, and have often assumed a religious nature. At the same time they are frequently linked to political manipulation.

Boko Haram and the recent crises

16. For many years a number of Islamic groups in northern Nigeria have sought to escape the corruption of the cities and form purer communities. They were usually armed, but not necessarily violent. A number of them, including one called the Talaban, developed into Boko Haram, often translated as 'western education is forbidden', or 'unclean'. It should be emphasised that what is understood by this varies. In 2009 following growing violence by BH (organised on a cell system and with its strongest base in the north east around Maiduguri, and across the border into Chad and Niger), a significant battle took place in Kano. The head of BH was captured and killed, possibly extra-judicially.
17. After a quieter period around the elections, BH rejected the result and has steadily and rapidly increased the level of violence. Bombs have gone off in the capital, Abuja, targeting the police and the UN. Maiduguri has been the scene of constant skirmishes. Damaturu, similarly, has seen heavily armed raids, and in all cases the principal targets have been the instruments of the state and Christians. The very free Nigerian press has reported the involvement of leading politicians from the north, and President Jonathan has said the same. BH is suspected of having penetrated elements of police and other security forces.
18. Christian communities have been massively affected, with thousands fleeing south, both indigenous and settlers. Bishops have had to flee. The church in the north east has received little protection, if any. In the north west near Sokoto, there is pressure, but much more protection, judging from a conversation with a local Bishop in mid January.
19. Elsewhere conflicts have simmered. In the immediate aftermath of the elections around 1,400 people died, about 85% in southern Kaduna, just north of the capital. Jos, which has seen much violence, is increasingly ghettoised, with no go areas for either Christians or Muslims, but in both cases these difference are also closely identified with ethnic conflicts going back generations. Villages outside Jos live in fear and under frequent attack, with little help from an overstretched security system.
20. In the south, there has been limited retaliation against Muslims. Some mosques have been burned and a few people killed. There are significant northern populations in Onitsha, a massive trading city at the apex of the Niger Delta.
21. The long standing conflict in the Delta itself has been quieter, as a result of a local President. But, the threat of a renewal is always there, and any closing down of oil supplies and thus revenue would be very destabilising for the country.
22. In addition in early January the Jonathan government tried to abolish the fuel subsidy, provoking very large scale protests. After a few days of more or less general strike, half the subsidy was reinstated. The level of protest indicates not merely the extent to which Nigerians rely on petrol but also the discontent with the governing class. The Nigerian press and politicians have talked openly of a sense of drift, leading to greater volatility and the risk of scapegoating minorities and/or seeking violent solutions.

Support for the Nigerian Government

23. It would be easy - but, at least in part, unfair - to blame the Nigerian government. The complexity of numerous conflicts would tax any state in its response. However, the Anglican Primate is calling for tough government action, and speaks of the importance of overseas encouragement. Nigeria is full of talented people and the Anglican Church is both strong and has capacity that is profoundly impressive. It is important not to lecture, but rather to support all possible forms of help that are invited and required.

Conclusion

24. In view of the grave crisis for Christians in the north east and middle belt, and the publicly expressed desire by the Primate, the Most Reverend Nicholas Okoh, that there be no retaliation, the General Synod is invited to express the solidarity of the Church of England for the plight of Christian churches facing the most severe persecution, and its support for justice for the free expression of faith throughout the countries, especially by minorities.

✠ Justin Dunelm:

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