

OpenDoors®

# Violent Militancy and its Impact on Christians

A BRIEF ON NIGERIA, BURKINA FASO  
AND CAMEROON



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*Open Doors' trauma centre in Nigeria*

# Introduction

Whilst violent conflicts are not a new phenomenon, the magnitude of violence committed against civilians and the complications surrounding the emergencies in the Sahel over the last decade are exceptionally alarming. The UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel, at a UN Security Council hearing in January 2023, called the security challenges in the region “unprecedented”.<sup>1</sup>

The Sahel is a diverse ethnic, religious and linguistic region, encompassing 10 countries with numerous social, political, economic as well as security challenges. Fragile institutions affected by corruption and the simultaneous proliferation of terrorist groups, particularly in West and Central Africa, have caused a humanitarian crisis in recent years. Violence caused by non-state armed groups and the counter insurgency operations by state forces has left millions of people either killed or displaced.<sup>2</sup>

While there were existing tensions between different groups (for example between sedentary and pastoralist groups, between youthful populations and the state, and between different faith groups), religion hardly contributed to political instability on a national level before the start of the 21st century. However, fissures started to become visible between the secular model of the state promoted by the political elites and the Islamic models fused with ideas propagated by Islamic scholars and clerics.<sup>3</sup> The emergence of Islamist groups linked with Al Qaida (AQIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), propagating violence, added new dimensions to these frictions.

To combat the rising violence and conflict, the Sahel has seen an interest and increase in international military presence. The United Nations as well as Europe, France, the US and regional states (Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Nigeria) have all either initiated or contributed to several counterterrorism initiatives and deployments in the region.<sup>4</sup>

While the violence has affected all those living in the region, Christian communities have proven particularly vulnerable. Given the increasing expansion of militant violence in the Sahel and its subsequent impact on Christian communities, as reported in its World Watch List 2023, Open Doors is launching a multi-year global campaign on militant violence in Sub-Saharan Africa. The aim is to join Christians in Sub-Saharan Africa in bringing change through ensuring that their fundamental rights and inherent dignity are respected, as well as that of their neighbors and the communities they live in.

This briefing paper provides a landscape analysis of selected available secondary sources on the effects of militant violence in the Sahel region, providing a summary of the various forms of militant violence and its impact on Christian communities in Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Nigeria.

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<sup>1</sup> The United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel - Report: [securitycouncilreport.org/att/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S\\_2022\\_1019.pdf](https://securitycouncilreport.org/att/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2022_1019.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> 2.9 million refugees and IDPs, according to UNHCR. [reporting.unhcr.org/sahel-situation#:~:text=Forced%20displacement%20in%20the%20central,in%20North%20Africa%20and%20Europe.](https://reporting.unhcr.org/sahel-situation#:~:text=Forced%20displacement%20in%20the%20central,in%20North%20Africa%20and%20Europe.)

<sup>3</sup> Benkirane, R. (ed.) (2016) ‘Radicalisation, violence et (in)sécurité. Ce que disent 800 sahéliens.’ Centre pour le dialogue humanitaire (HD) et Programme des Nations unies pour le Développement (PNUD).

<sup>4</sup> [tellerreport.com/news/2020-03-27--france-and-12-other-countries-form-the-nakuba-task-force-to-fight-terrorists-in-the-sahel-.S1u0llnll.html](https://tellerreport.com/news/2020-03-27--france-and-12-other-countries-form-the-nakuba-task-force-to-fight-terrorists-in-the-sahel-.S1u0llnll.html); [reliefweb.int/report/mali/what-are-international-military-options-sahel](https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/what-are-international-military-options-sahel); [crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/291-what-role-multinational-joint-task-force-fighting-boko-haram](https://crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/291-what-role-multinational-joint-task-force-fighting-boko-haram).



# Burkina Faso

Previously appreciated for being politically and socially stable, and as a mediator and constructive actor in sub-regional security, Burkina Faso's situation has become precarious. The end of 27 years of the Compaoré presidency in 2014 revealed deep divisions resulting in a security crisis that involved several coups d'état, as well as an increase in terrorism and organized crime.<sup>5</sup>

Levels of insecurity are particularly high in the north and north-east of the country where militant groups, ethnic militias and security forces are fighting for control.<sup>6</sup> The northern region has been infiltrated by groups from neighbouring Mali, moving across porous borders for their attacks and operations. It is estimated that 50% of Burkina Faso's territory is no longer under government control.<sup>7</sup>

Since the start of the insurgency in 2015, several militant Islamist groups have been active in the country. These include Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), Islamic State West Africa (ISWAP), Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS), the Support Group for Islam and Muslims (GSIM), Ansar ul-Islam, and Boko Haram. Ansar ul-Islam have launched attacks on schools and intimidated schoolteachers into replacing French with Arabic as the language of instruction. Schools not offering classes on Islam were burned down.<sup>8</sup>

While ethnic conflicts are rare in Burkina Faso, the government is accused of stoking tensions by re-framing its assessment of the situation from one of violent and faith-based extremism to ethnic-based struggles.<sup>9</sup> The militarized response of the Burkinabe government to the surging violence has allegedly included indiscriminate attacks against civilian populations from certain ethnic groups, atrocities such as the rape of women

in front of their families, and summary executions.<sup>10</sup> Such responses have caused resentment against the government.<sup>11</sup>

The violence has caused the displacement of nearly 2 million people in a country with a population of just under 21 million.<sup>12</sup> On December 1, 2021, following a visit to the country, the U.N. Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet warned that more than 3.5 million people need humanitarian assistance in Burkina Faso—a 60% increase since January 2020.<sup>13</sup>

## The Response

Since the beginning of the crisis in 2015, the Burkinabe government lost control of territories in the north and northeast of the country to militant groups, which infiltrated from neighboring Mali and continue to move between borders for their attacks and operations. Moreover, the response of the government to the surging violence, which mainly manifested in increased security and military operations against the militant groups, resulted also in indiscriminate attacks against civilian populations from specific ethnic groups. Such responses further disenfranchised certain ethnic groups and has increased resentment against the government among the population in the north of the country.<sup>14</sup>

## How Christians are affected

The political uncertainty at home, the expanding activity of Islamist militants as well as the growing insecurity in neighbouring countries, has made the country an increasingly difficult place to live as a Christian. Historically, Burkina Faso has always been known for its model of religious coexistence in the Sahel region: Muslims, Christians, and Animists have lived next to each other in peace for years.<sup>15</sup> Attacks by

<sup>5</sup> reuters.com/article/uk-burkina-politics-idUKKCN0JC01B20141128.

<sup>6</sup> Burkina Faso: Full Country Dossier, January 2023. Available at: [opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/country-dossiers](https://opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/country-dossiers).

<sup>7</sup> [bbc.co.uk/news/topics/ce1qrvielrrt/burkina-faso?ns\\_mchannel=social&ns\\_source=twitter&ns\\_campaign=bbc\\_live&ns\\_linkname=64394347bb343d77c498f9cf%26Burkina%20Faso%20%27mobilisation%27%20ramps%20up%20terror%20response%262023-04-14T12%3A39%3A10.768Z&ns\\_fee=0&pinned\\_post\\_locator=urn:asset:cb5357ac-795f-44ec-a7ee-11ed46a9ac31&pinned\\_post\\_asset\\_id=64394347bb343d77c498f9cf&pinned\\_post\\_type=share](https://www.bbc.com/news/topics/ce1qrvielrrt/burkina-faso?ns_mchannel=social&ns_source=twitter&ns_campaign=bbc_live&ns_linkname=64394347bb343d77c498f9cf%26Burkina%20Faso%20%27mobilisation%27%20ramps%20up%20terror%20response%262023-04-14T12%3A39%3A10.768Z&ns_fee=0&pinned_post_locator=urn:asset:cb5357ac-795f-44ec-a7ee-11ed46a9ac31&pinned_post_asset_id=64394347bb343d77c498f9cf&pinned_post_type=share).

<sup>8</sup> [hrw.org/report/2020/05/26/their-war-against-education/armed-group-attacks-teachers-students-and-schools](https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/05/26/their-war-against-education/armed-group-attacks-teachers-students-and-schools).

<sup>9</sup> [reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Sahel\\_ViolentExtremismVulnerabilityResilience\\_EN\\_2018.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Sahel_ViolentExtremismVulnerabilityResilience_EN_2018.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> [qz.com/africa/1756917/burkina-faso-has-replaced-mali-at-heart-of-sahel-security-crisis](https://qz.com/africa/1756917/burkina-faso-has-replaced-mali-at-heart-of-sahel-security-crisis).

<sup>12</sup> [reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/usaid-bureau-humanitarian-assistance-burkina-faso-assistance-overview-april-2023](https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/usaid-bureau-humanitarian-assistance-burkina-faso-assistance-overview-april-2023).

<sup>13</sup> [countertextremism.com/countries/burkina-faso-extremism-and-terrorism](https://countertextremism.com/countries/burkina-faso-extremism-and-terrorism).

<sup>14</sup> [qz.com/africa/1756917/burkina-faso-has-replaced-mali-at-heart-of-sahel-security-crisis](https://qz.com/africa/1756917/burkina-faso-has-replaced-mali-at-heart-of-sahel-security-crisis).

<sup>15</sup> "Burkina Faso: Preserving the religious balance", International Crisis Group, 6 September 2016. Available at: [crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-preserving-religious-balance](https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-preserving-religious-balance).

militants and the spread of radical ideology, however, are threatening the country's exemplary model of social cohesion and religious tolerance. There have been reports of attacks on churches,<sup>16</sup> killings,<sup>17</sup> and kidnappings.<sup>18</sup> Many Christians have fled their homes, leading to warnings that whole areas will be left without a church presence.<sup>19</sup> Over 250 civilians were killed in summary executions in 2019 alone. The perpetrators justified the killings by explaining that the victims were Christian or had sided with the government or the West.<sup>20</sup> On February 16, 2020, militants attacked a protestant church in the town of Pansi, in Yagha province, killing 24 and injuring at least 18. Militants set the church on fire.<sup>21</sup>

Burkina Faso is number 23 in 2023's Open Doors World Watch List, down from 32 in 2022. The targeting and killing of Christians has created an environment of fear, with many Christians being too scared to attend church services or send their children to school.<sup>22</sup> Militant groups are also replacing the government in areas under their control and have taken over providing social services.<sup>23</sup>

### Examples of incidents reported by Open Doors

- **On February 2, 2023**, 10 people were killed when the vehicle they were traveling in was hit by an Improvised Explosive Device near Inamoufali, south-eastern Burkina Faso. The victims were traveling to cemeteries to bury four people who had been killed in an attack by unidentified armed men the day before.
- **On January 27, 2023**, more than 50 militants raided the village of Bananganti near the border with Togo. They looted homes, stole cattle and kidnapped three people. The attack caused an exodus of villagers, fleeing to safer areas.
- **On May 30, 2022**, armed men killed at least 50 people in Madjoari, southeast Burkina Faso. The victims, mostly men, were fleeing a blockage by militants. The assault was the deadliest since June 2021 when at least 132 civilians were killed in a militant attack in Solhan, in the northeast of the country.<sup>24</sup>

## Recommendations

### TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

1. Provide further assistance to the Support Joint Force G5S contingents and the wider Burkinabe Security Forces, providing capacity training and expertise advice on the model of EUCAP Sahel Niger and EUCAP Sahel Mali deployed by the European Union and the programs under Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership by the United States of America.
2. Invest in programs and initiatives that nurture, preserve and reinforce social cohesion and unity amongst religious groups in Burkina Faso and create resilience against radicalization and violent extremism.

### TO THE GOVERNMENT OF BURKINA FASO:

1. Exert close oversight on the Security Forces to ensure a proportionate response to the security crisis and ensure that any operation deployed will be compliant with international human rights standards. The Security Forces must prevent any indiscriminate attacks against civilians and any action that will foster the stigmatization of specific people groups.



<sup>16</sup> aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/17/dozens-killed-in-church-attack-in-burkina-faso.

<sup>17</sup> fides.org/en/news/73243AFRICA\_BURKINA\_FASO\_Catholic\_priest\_murdered\_in\_north\_west\_of\_the\_country.

<sup>18</sup> dw.com/en/why-kidnappers-in-west-africa-now-target-women/a-64461678; ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/01/turk-alarmed-abduction-least-50-women-burkina-faso.

<sup>19</sup> thetablet.co.uk/news/11844/burkina-faso-bishop-warns-of-elimination-of-christians-in-the-country.

<sup>20</sup> hrw.org/news/2020/01/06/burkina-faso-armed-islamist-atrocities-surge.

<sup>21</sup> theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/17/burkina-faso-church-attack-dead-wounded.

<sup>22</sup> Burkina Faso: Full Country Dossier, ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> reuters.com/world/africa/armed-attackers-kill-100-civilians-burkina-faso-village-raid-2021-06-05.



*An Open Doors' beneficiary, Isuwah Yakabu, in his destroyed village Guyaka, northeastern Nigeria*

# Nigeria

Nigeria faces multiple security threats across its territory, with insecurity deepening in the north and south of the country. The authorities, whether federal or state, seem either unable or unwilling to protect large sections of society. The country is home to more than 250 ethnic groups and ethnicity and religion, which are often politicized, have long presented challenges to nation-building. Under the Constitution, Nigeria is a secular state with no official state religion. Despite that, in 1999, Sharia law was introduced in the north and is now established in 12 states.<sup>25</sup>

Boko Haram once controlled significant territory in northern Nigeria.<sup>26</sup> Although it lost its leader (Shekau) and has been militarily diminished in recent years, it remains active. Boko Haram is notorious for targeting Christians, abducting and killing males and abducting, raping and forcibly marrying women and girls. Non-Muslim students and teachers attending secular education institutions in the north have been targeted because Boko Haram militants perceive their engagement with modern education as a sign of disobedience and schools as breeding grounds for corruption.<sup>27</sup> Similar violence is carried out by Boko Haram's splinter faction Islamic State West Africa (ISWAP), which pledges allegiance to Islamic State.<sup>28</sup> Boko Haram and ISWAP militants have held hostages for years. On April 14, 2014, 276 schoolgirls were abducted by Boko Haram in Chibok. More than 100 of them remain in captivity as of today. The families of the hostages hardly ever receive updates on the government's efforts to release them.<sup>29</sup>

In Nigeria's Middle Belt region a decentralized armed group with ethnic ties to the pastoralist Fulani people, the Fulani Ethnic Militia (FEM),<sup>30</sup> attack predominantly Christian villages, abducting, raping and killing people, destroying buildings and harvests or occupying farmlands.<sup>31</sup>

While the violence has complex and often disputed root causes, it has intensified ethnic and religious divisions.<sup>32</sup> Adding to the insecurity are attacks by other armed criminals, commonly referred to as 'bandits', who engage in cattle rustling,

mass abduction of school children, kidnap for ransom and pillaging of villages.<sup>33</sup> The insurgencies and conflict have forced more than 3 million Nigerians to flee their homes.<sup>34</sup>

## The Response

The governments' response to Islamist groups terrorizing the population has contributed to an escalation of violence, fueled by the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) in the country. Fulani militants attacking farmer communities have access to military-grade weapons such as machine guns and AK-type rifles.<sup>35</sup> Studies show that most of the weapons in circulation in Nigeria are in the hands of civilians, and that most arms are held illegally. Predominantly Christian communities complain of the government's failure to seize Fulani militants' weapons – with the security forces often showing up hours after a Fulani militia attack, leaving predominantly Christian communities defenseless and at the mercy of violent militants, increasing a sense of impunity.

The combination of arms proliferation, impunity and government inaction has allowed Boko Haram to expand its operations and has caused an increase in violence in the northwest of Nigeria, where attacks by armed bandits on villages and schools are becoming endemic.<sup>36</sup>

While the government's response sometimes appears passive, in other situations it can be described as heavy-handed. Some military operations to eradicate Islamist militants have been criticized as being contrary to international standards, for example in failing to take due precautions when attacking. There have also been allegations of the military subjecting persons to arbitrary punishment based on anonymous accusations or suspected sympathies with militant groups.<sup>37</sup>

## How Christians are affected

Nigeria has featured again in the Open Doors' World Watch List top 10 in the last three years and tops the list of countries where Christians experience most violence globally. Between October 1, 2021 and September 30, 2022 almost 5,000

<sup>25</sup> qeh.ox.ac.uk/content/sharia-implementation-northern-nigeria-after-15-years.

<sup>26</sup> acleddata.com/10-conflicts-to-worry-about-in2022/nigeria/#:~:text=While%20a%20long%20running%20Islamist,political%20violence%20events%20in%20Nigeria.

<sup>27</sup> Momodu, J.A. (2021) 'Islamising education in northeast of Nigeria: Understanding the key motivations of Boko Haram Jihadists attacks on educational institutions', *African Journal of Terrorism and Insurgency Research*, 2(2), p.19.

<sup>28</sup> Nigeria: Full Country Dossier, January 2022. Available at: [opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Full-Country-Dossier-Nigeria-2022.pdf](https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Full-Country-Dossier-Nigeria-2022.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> [worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/10/leah-sharibus-mother-pleads-to-nigerian-president-as-kidnappers-threaten-to-kill-leah/](https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/10/leah-sharibus-mother-pleads-to-nigerian-president-as-kidnappers-threaten-to-kill-leah/).

<sup>30</sup> Explaining transhumance-related violence: Fulani Ethnic Militia in rural Nigeria, *Journal of Rural Studies*, Vol. 8, January 2015. Available at: [sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0743016721003648](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0743016721003648).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>32</sup> Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence, International Crisis Group, July 2018. Available at: [crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/262-stopping-nigerias-spiralling-farmer-herder-violence](https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/262-stopping-nigerias-spiralling-farmer-herder-violence).

<sup>33</sup> [aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/6/nigeria-labels-bandit-gangs-terrorists-in-bid-to-stem-violence](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/6/nigeria-labels-bandit-gangs-terrorists-in-bid-to-stem-violence).

<sup>34</sup> [unhcr.org/us/countries/nigeria/#:~:text=As%20of%20June%202022%2C%20there,other%20parts%20of%20the%20country](https://www.unhcr.org/us/countries/nigeria/#:~:text=As%20of%20June%202022%2C%20there,other%20parts%20of%20the%20country).

<sup>35</sup> Amnesty International, *Ibid.*, pp. 50-61; 35-37.

<sup>36</sup> [issafrica.org/iss-today/boko-haram-teams-up-with-bandits-in-nigeria](https://www.issafrica.org/iss-today/boko-haram-teams-up-with-bandits-in-nigeria).

<sup>37</sup> Benkirane, R. (ed.) (2016), 'Radicalisation, violence et (in)sécurité. Ce que disent 800 sahéliens.' Centre pour le dialogue humanitaire (HD) et Programme des Nations unies pour le Développement (PNUD).

Nigerian Christians were killed in violence relating to Boko Haram, Fulani militants and ‘bandits’.<sup>38</sup>

Besides loss of life, Christians face physical injury, rape and other forms of sexual harassment, as well as loss of property and destruction of farmlands. In addition, abductions for ransom have increased considerably over recent years.<sup>39</sup> As a result of the violence, Christians are being dispossessed of their land and means of livelihood and many live as Internally Displaced People (IDPs) or refugees.

## Examples of incidents reported by Open Doors

- **On April 15, 2023**, alleged Fulani militia attacked the Christian village of Runji, in Zangon Kataf Local Government Area, northern Kaduna State. The Chairman of the village council, Francis Sani, reported that 33 people were killed, 7 injured, and over 40 houses burned. Some of the victims were burned alive as the attackers set houses ablaze.
- **On April 7, 2023**, at least 32 internally displaced Christians were killed when Fulani militants attacked a large informal camp in Benue State, north-central Nigeria. This informal IDP camp, located on a piece of land next to a local primary school, houses over nearly 30,000 people, mostly Christians, who fled their villages after Fulani militant attacks. The camp’s population consists mostly of women and children. The men have either been killed or have tried to return to their farms to earn some kind of income for their displaced families. Many of the men that do live in the camp are elderly or injured. According to reports, the majority of those killed were women and children.
- **On March 23, 2023**, armed Fulani militia stormed the Christian villages of Dnalagwa, Apuluwyi and Sabon Gida Kurebe in Shiroro Local Government Area, in Nigeria’s north-central Niger State. Villagers were woken up by the sound of gunshots. At least 6 were killed and 56 were kidnapped. The attackers also raped 26 women and girls, 9 of them under the age of 18. The assault lasted for hours without any intervention from security forces in the area. Four people were killed in attacks on neighbouring villages earlier that week.

## Recommendations

### TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

1. Collaborate with and urge the Nigerian government to discharge its constitutional duty to ensure the safety and security of civilians as per international conventions and treaties that Nigeria has ratified and therefore legally bound to respect;
2. Urge the Nigerian government to take a strong stance against all violence, including Fulani militant violence, investigate the perpetrators, hold them accountable to the justice system and break the cycle of violence that is expanding to other areas of the country;
3. Urge the Nigerian Government to continue its efforts to liberate the hostages held by Boko Haram, including young Christian girls such as Leah Sharibu and the Chibok girls who are still held captive.

### TO THE GOVERNMENT OF NIGERIA:

1. Urgently ensure the domestication of the Economic Community of West African States’ (ECOWAS) Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons into national law and ensure its full and effective implementation.
2. Create a position within the government for the sole purpose of maintaining an active family liaison and an open and accessible channel of communication with the traumatized parents of those who are kidnapped by militants.



*Pastor Jeremiah and his wife. Their village in Nigeria’s Middle Belt was attacked in April 2020*

<sup>38</sup> orfa.africa/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/120123-ORFA-Preliminary-fact-sheets-on-killings-and-abductions-in-Nigeria-Oct-21-to-Sep-22.pdf.

<sup>39</sup> Nigeria: Full Country Dossier, Ibid.





*Sara, an Open Doors' beneficiary, lost her husband due to violence in the Far North region of Cameroon.*

# Cameroon

Cameroon faces an armed insurgency by separatist groups centred around the Anglophone regions in the North and Southwest regions.<sup>40</sup> It also is under severe pressure from Islamist militants with attacks by Boko Haram and Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the Far North region. Religion in Cameroon is said to be a matter of ethnicity. Although Islam is firmly established in the three northern administrative regions (Adamawa, North, and Far North), there are scattered Christian communities throughout.<sup>41</sup> Created through post-colonial territorial fragmentation, Cameroon's Far North has been largely neglected by the national government.<sup>42</sup> The region has the highest poverty rate in the country at 66% and a very low level of education with the literacy rate being a little over 28%.<sup>43</sup> Desertification also crippled traditional economic activities that were once undertaken by the region's different ethnic communities.<sup>44</sup>

The difficult economic situation and weak governance, compounded by porous borders with corrupt customs and weak security presence, has made the Far North region particularly vulnerable to the infiltration of Islamist militants

like Boko Haram.<sup>45</sup> While Boko Haram operates in Far North, ISWAP has been attacking security forces and civilians around Cameroon's Lake Chad area and Maroua, the capital of the Far North region, on a regular basis. The violence has led to the forced displacement of at least 378,000 people while 1.2 million are in need of humanitarian aid.<sup>46</sup>

In March 2023 more than 4,000 people were displaced in the region following attacks by non-state armed groups involving raids on villages, kidnappings and the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs).<sup>47</sup> There are reports of killings<sup>48</sup> and beheadings<sup>49</sup> as well. Meanwhile, there is discontent with the government forces who have been accused of violations of international humanitarian and human rights laws, including in killings and arbitrary arrests.<sup>50</sup>

## How Christians are affected

Christians in the region have been forced to flee their homes to find safety from indiscriminate violent attacks and kidnappings,<sup>51</sup> causing churches to adjust activities or close. In other areas, security injunctions have set heavy restrictions on church activities. Cameroon is 45 on Open Doors' 2023 World Watch List.



*Hannah and Sarah lost their husbands in a Boko Haram attack on their village of Hittawa in the North of Cameroon*

<sup>40</sup> [crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon](https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon).

<sup>41</sup> Goyek, Daga Robert, The State of Christian-Muslim Relations in Cameroon: Challenges Opportunities for Collaboration for Peace and Development. Paper presented at the Africa and Muslim Religious Leaders Conference on Peace and Development, Addis Abeba, Ethiopia, 8–13 January 2012; pp. 101–3.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, The political economy of violence in the Far North.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, The political economy of violence in the Far North, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> [crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/b133-extreme-nord-du-cameroun-le-casse-tete-de-la-reconstruction-en-periode-de-conflit](https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/b133-extreme-nord-du-cameroun-le-casse-tete-de-la-reconstruction-en-periode-de-conflit).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, The political economy of violence in the Far North.

<sup>46</sup> [reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/cameroon-extreme-nord-rapport-de-situation-no-24-juillet-2022](https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/cameroon-extreme-nord-rapport-de-situation-no-24-juillet-2022).

<sup>47</sup> [reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/cameroon-humanitarian-bulletin-march-2023](https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/cameroon-humanitarian-bulletin-march-2023).

<sup>48</sup> [voanews.com/a/cameroon-s-large-scale-boko-haram-attacks-leave-thousands-homeless-/7057215.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/cameroon-s-large-scale-boko-haram-attacks-leave-thousands-homeless-/7057215.html); [amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/cameroon-275-killed-boko-haram-far-north-victims-feel-abandoned](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/cameroon-275-killed-boko-haram-far-north-victims-feel-abandoned).

<sup>49</sup> [humanglemedia.com/elderly-woman-beheaded-by-boko-haram-in-far-north-cameroon](https://www.humanglemedia.com/elderly-woman-beheaded-by-boko-haram-in-far-north-cameroon).

<sup>50</sup> [hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/cameroon](https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/cameroon).

<sup>51</sup> Kpughe L, Christian Churches and the Boko Haram Insurgency in Cameroon: Dilemmas and Responses, Religions 2017, 8(8), 143, 2017.

## Examples of incidents reported by Open Doors

- **On March 17, 2023**, a large group attacked the villages of Zeleved and Kirawa Mafa near the border with Nigeria. The group of an estimated 2,000 people descended on the area in three waves. Heavily armed men started the attack by targeting the military camp of the BIR (Rapid Intervention Battalion) in Zeleved. The group that followed looted houses and livestock while a third group went around setting houses on fire. Witnesses reported that they could hear attackers shouting “Allahu Akubar” (Allah is greater (God)) during the attack. A soldier was beheaded and 15 injured. The armed group kidnapped two men in their 20s and stole motorcycles, pick-up trucks, weapons and cattle. Most villagers have fled to safer areas.
- **On July 7, 2022**, Boko Haram attacked the village of Kangarouwa. As they stormed the village, firing randomly at people fleeing, they killed a family of four. Ms Achi Issiakou and her husband Issiakou were carrying their two-year-old daughter and a four-year-old son, fleeing the attackers together with Mr Issiakou’s father, when bullets struck. Mrs Issiakou, pregnant with their third child, was the only one to survive. She witnessed her husband, son and father-in-law being shot but kept running with her daughter in her arms. By the time she reached safety, she noticed her daughter had died from shot wounds as well. The total number of casualties has not been confirmed.
- **On Sunday April 25, 2022**, around midnight, suspected Boko Haram militants attacked the community of Bargaram in the Logone and Chari Division. They fired a rocket at the Catholic church, burning it to the ground, looted properties and killed a local health worker who refused to treat their wounded soldiers.



## Recommendations

### TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

1. Provide capacity training and expertise advice on the model of EUCAP Sahel Niger and EUCAP Sahel Mali deployed by the European Union.
2. Support the Government of Cameroon to strengthen its borders to prevent infiltration of militants into Cameroonian territories from bordering countries and ensure that militants do not have an easy way out of the country’s borders to escape Security Force.
3. Increase humanitarian aid to displaced people because of the violence and explore ways of involving Local Faith Actors, who have easy access to communities in crisis and are usually the first responders.

### TO THE GOVERNMENT OF CAMEROON:

1. Increase the presence of security forces and strengthen border control in the Far North.



*Esther with her young children, Open Doors’ beneficiaries, affected by the violence in the Far North region of Cameroon*

