Islamist militants are targeting Christians in Burkina Faso: ‘They are planting seeds of a religious conflict’

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By [Danielle Paquette](https://www.washingtonpost.com/people/danielle-paquette/)

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One evening in late June, gunmen stormed a village in northern Burkina Faso and ordered people who had been chatting outside to lie down.

Then the armed strangers checked everyone’s necks, searching for jewelry. They found four men wearing crucifixes — Christians. They executed them.

The murders in Beni, reported by [Catholic leadership in the region](https://cruxnow.com/church-in-africa/2019/08/02/burkina-faso-church-appeals-for-protection-against-terror-attacks/), followed attacks on churches in the West African nation that have left at least two dozen people dead since February, according to local news reports. It was the second time in as many months that militants singled out worshipers wearing Christian imagery.

A spreading Islamist insurgency has transformed Burkina Faso from a peaceful country known for farming, [a celebrated film festival](https://qz.com/africa/1556071/fespaco-burkina-faso-film-festival-celebrates-50-years/) and religious tolerance into a [hotbed of extremism.](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47495038)

The trouble began three years ago with a grim domino effect: Militants trickled in from neighboring Mali, which was wrestling with its own insurgency — and many carried weapons from the 2011 collapse of Libya.

Attacks by fighters linked to the Islamic State and al-Qaeda [have quadrupled](https://africacenter.org/spotlight/progress-and-setbacks-in-the-fight-against-african-militant-islamist-groups-in-2018/) since 2017 in Burkina Faso, according to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies in Washington. The violence has pushed at least 70,000 people to flee their homes since January, estimates the United Nations.

The death toll from the conflict is hard to pin down, analysts say, but the majority of victims have been Muslim. Islamist groups killed approximately 1,110 people in the region last year, according to [the Africa Center](https://africacenter.org/spotlight/the-complex-and-growing-threat-of-militant-islamist-groups-in-the-sahel/) — a surge from 218 in 2016.

The attacks aimed at Christians signal a shift in the militants’ strategy from indiscriminate gunfire to attempts at dividing communities as they seek to quash any trace of Western influence, said Chrysogone Zougmore, president of the Burkinabe Movement for Human and Peoples’ Rights, a victim advocacy group in the country’s capital, Ouagadougou.

“They are planting seeds of a religious conflict,” Zougmore said. “They want to create hate. They want to create differences between us.”

Most people in Burkina Faso are Muslim, but a Christian minority — now about a quarter of the population — has worshiped in the country of roughly 19 million for more than a century.

People generally get along, regardless of how they pray. Neighbors dance, drink and watch soccer together. Children grow up in homes with a mix of traditions.

“You can’t tell the Christians from the Muslims in the street,” said Zougmore, a Christian married to a Muslim.

Terrorists seem to want to destroy that harmony, said Illia Djadi, senior analyst for sub-Saharan Africa at Open Doors International, a group focused on helping persecuted Christians.

They initially targeted military troops, fancy hotels and schools. Now, he said, they appear to be trying to drive non-Muslims out of the north.

“They appear to be using a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy,” Djadi said.

Attacks explicitly against Christians in Burkina Faso hadn’t happened before this spring, he said.

In February, militants sought out and killed a Catholic priest in the eastern town of Bittou, according to local news reports.

In April, they interrupted a[Protestant church](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/killed-burkina-faso-church-attack-190429103434033.html) service in northern Silgadji, demanding that everyone convert to Islam. Then they led five men who were wearing crosses outside and shot them, said Nebie Badiou, head of a Baptist church association in Ouagadougou.

“It’s one thing to be Christian, and it’s another to publicly show Christ with a cross,” Badiou said. “They were sending a signal: Do not display your faith.”

In May, gunmen torched a church in [another northern village](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/church-attack-in-burkina-faso-kills-at-least-6/2019/05/12/7bbbb3e4-74d5-11e9-b3f5-5673edf2d127_story.html), claiming the lives of a priest and five parishioners. They struck a procession the next day, killing four. They ambushed a Sunday mass in the same region two weeks later, killing four, [local media reported](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/killed-church-attack-burkina-faso-190526192956228.html).

Then came the June attack, which led to the deaths of the four men wearing crucifixes, bishops confirmed.

And earlier this month, they [killed three worshipers](https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM/status/1158096201893502976) in attacks on Protestant and Catholic churches in the eastern city of Tialboanga.

“We’re very afraid,” said Yacouba Lido, 30, a Christian who works as a translator for nonprofit groups in the country.

Lido, who lives in the center of Burkina Faso, visited northern villages twice this summer to talk to people who witnessed attacks.

“They’re all running away,” he said. “I saw people coming back on donkeys and bikes — all moving toward the capital.”

Islamist fighters are gaining territory in places the military cannot reach, said Emily Estelle, senior analyst for the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, which tracks the spread of terrorism.

Extremists — homegrown and some suspected to have trained in Afghanistan — are aiming to “destabilize the country and take control of Muslim communities,” she co-wrote in report [this month](https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-militants-target-christians-in-burkina-faso) on the issue.

Religious leaders in Burkina Faso are pleading for help.

“If the world continues to do nothing,” Bishop Laurent Dabire, president of the Episcopal Conference of Burkina Faso and Niger, said in an Aug. 1 [statement](https://cruxnow.com/church-in-africa/2019/08/02/burkina-faso-church-appeals-for-protection-against-terror-attacks/), “the result will be the elimination of the Christian presence.”