

NIGERIA'S 'MIDDLE BELT'

A Christian perspective of a community in conflict

THE FULANI PEOPLE

The Fulani herdsmen, a primarily Muslim people-group of West Africa, is the **largest nomadic group** in the world. They live mainly in Nigeria, Mali, Guinea, Cameroon, Senegal and Niger.

The ethnic group of **20 million people** accounts for around **90 percent of herders** in the region.

The Fulani people is regarded as an 'unreached people group' with less than **0.35%** being **Christian** and **1 Christian worker** for every **63,000 people**.



By Mike Burnard

During the first three months of 2019, hundreds of lives were lost and hundreds of homes were burned, raising new concerns about the truth behind the violence occurring between Muslim Fulani herdsmen and predominantly Christian Bachama farmers in Nigeria. In addition to the seemingly countless numbers of people killed, it has been estimated that as many as 300,000 people (mostly Christian farmers) have been displaced from their homes by the violence.

An *Open Doors* report lists detailed examples of atrocities perpetrated by the Fulani herdsmen, including the destruction of houses and churches and the seizure of land and properties belonging to Christian owners. The report presents a comprehensive picture pointing to grave elements of religious persecution.

This narrative labels the Muslim Fulani attacks against Christian farmers as a "genocide" perpetrated by radicalised Muslims looking to drive Christians from their homes.

But even though this might be fully true, it is not the full truth. There is also a second narrative that describes the killings as being part of a historical conflict worsened by several external factors. The reality is – as tragic as the attacks on Christian brothers and sisters are, and as true as the reports might be – the context of ongoing violence seems far more complex than just a matter of opposing religions. The tension between nomadic herders, the different tribal complexities, regional terrorism and conflicts between nomads and settled farming communities throughout the region is often aggravated by resource scarcity and desertification ("land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas resulting from various factors, including climatic variations and human activities"). These are all contributing factors within an African worldview of fear and power that creates an explosive platform for regional and religious conflict.

Indeed, the situation is extremely complex, and a comprehensive understanding is required for those who seek long-term solutions.

Samuel Smith, in an article for *The Christian Post* on 25 March 2019, asked five key questions that all Christians need to consider about the Fulani conflict in Nigeria.

1. What's at the root of the crisis?
2. How many have died?
3. What role do Christian farmers play in the conflict?
4. Is there a religious element or is this simply a "farmer-herder" conflict?
5. What has been done to stop the atrocities?

1. WHAT'S AT THE ROOT OF THE CRISIS?

What's at the root of the conflict between Muslim Fulani herders and Christian Bachama farmers is as complex as it is multi-dimensional, and the answers would vary depending on who is asked. The crisis is generally blamed on the Islamic-Christian divide and consequently points to persecution of Christians. But factors like Nigeria's national

leadership, the 'herder-farmer' and 'nomad-settler' conflicts, tribal differences, the desertification of land and the never-ending cycle of retaliation all play major roles in this escalating crisis.

Firstly, it is important to understand the '*power-fear*' worldview of Africa. This worldview often overpowers even religious and faith convictions. Western democracies are based on a worldview that discerns between 'right' and 'wrong', while African politics focuses on tribal dominance – empowering one tribe at the cost of another in terms of national or regional power.

In this regard, the power distribution in an African nation will contribute to both the confidence and the fears of the people, depending on which side of the fence you stand. Even though only 6.3% of all Nigerians belong to the Fulani

tribe, the political power is currently firmly in the hands of the Fulani Muslim people. On 26 February 2019, Nigeria's electoral commission confirmed that President Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC) was re-elected for another term.



Muhammadu Buhari was born to a Fulani family in Daura, Katsina State, where his father (Hardo Adamu) was a Fulani chief. Feeding off and fuelling the northern Muslim desire for a northern Muslim president, Mr Buhari warned continuously that violence would erupt and blood would flow if he was denied the presidency. Christian fears escalated, especially through the Muslim-dominated north and volatile 'Middle Belt' region. This platform of political power highly complicates the very volatile situation.

Secondly, competing claims to land and other resources has further complicated relationships. According to the **American Security Project**, 75% of the grassland in northern Nigeria is now 'desertified', which has reconfigured the geography and landscape of Nigeria entirely. In the north-east, the number of rain days has dropped by over 50%, while erratic rainfall and temperatures have increased in the north-west. Abnormal weather patterns and desert encroachment are resulting in ecological and economic destabilisation within the semi-arid region of northern Nigeria, particularly impacting the livestock and farming sectors.

Changing precipitation patterns are reducing crop yields for farmers and disrupting water supplies for herdsman, significantly altering traditional practices and resulting in the abandonment of many farms and villages. Nomadic Fulani herdsman are in constant search of waterholes and grazing for their cattle. Due to land scarcity, herders are permanently relocating to areas that are already inhabited by farmers in more central and southern Nigeria. Fulani herdsman and Bachama farmers must now compete over scarce fertile land, exacerbating tensions and violence between the two groups. Herdsman and farmers are resorting to violence to maintain their livelihoods.

Furthermore, Nigeria already has a north-south, Muslim-Christian divide. Therefore, the conflict is advancing pre-existing religious tensions. The Fulani herders, who are predominantly Muslim, are migrating to the 'Middle Belt' region, where Christian Bachama farmers generally live.

According to the **2018 Global Terrorism Index** (produced by the **Institute for Economics and Peace**): "At its core, the herder-farmer violence occurring in Nigeria revolves around the economic plight resulting from the worsening drought and land degradation in Nigeria's northern regions. The livelihood of Nigeria's Fulani population is threatened as desertification of their land pushes them south. Crop yields of Nigeria's central and southern-based farmers, on the other hand, are threatened as grazing practices destroy crops due to the increased presence of cattle."

The report notes that there is a long-term potential to disrupt the Nigerian agriculture and livestock economy as the land in both Nigeria's northern and southern states deteriorates. Anietie Ewang, a researcher with **Human Rights Watch** based in Nigeria, told **The Christian Post** that the presence of Boko Haram in the northeast and bandits in the northwest are further driving the Fulani herders to the 'Middle Belt'. "While conflicts such as this are not new to the 'Middle Belt' because they have always had nomadic communities that come around, you also see a situation where it is increased and leading to more violence and an unusual number of deaths than we have seen in the past," she explained.

She added that the problem has possibly been compounded by the fact that many local governments have not done a good job maintaining local grazing routes that were established in the 1960s and early 1970s. She explained that the migration has led to more herders grazing their cattle on farmland which they do not have permission to do, and that leads to the potential destruction of crops. “It could be that the farmers killed the cattle or killed one or two of the cows or hurt one of the herdsmen,” Ewang said.



Thirdly, and not least important, is the role of religion. In the **Religious Prayer Bulletin** of 8 November 2017, Elizabeth Kendal explored the idea that the Fulani are often used as proxies for an Islamic ‘jihad’.

“While the Bible mandates Christians spread the Good News that God reconciles sinners to himself through Jesus Christ,” Kendal said “... Islam mandates Muslims expand the territory under Allah's rule (i.e. under Islamic Sharia Law – a political mandate). Forced out by the ever-encroaching desert, the traditionally nomadic Fulani cattle herders migrate south in search of food and water for their livestock. These Fulani are then exploited by jihadists and other Islamists – including those in the military and in the government – who use them as proxies in an Islamic jihad to expand Muslim territory at the expense of Christians. This is why they routinely attack with high-powered automatic weapons and wear bullet-proof vests and military fatigues. It is also why they are virtually never caught.”

There is no doubt that Christians have suffered severely under these attacks, and that the Church should intervene and pray, but it is also important to place these attacks in the context of the bigger picture and within the Biblical understanding of what it means to be “persecuted for righteousness’ sake”.

2. HOW MANY HAVE DIED?

Although estimates have varied and numbers are often unclear, one thing is certain about the Fulani-farmer conflict in Nigeria: there was a noticeable spike in the number of killings in 2018 and in the first three months of 2019. But it remains virtually impossible to get exact numbers:

- **Human Rights Watch** estimates through monitoring of credible media that at least **1,600** were killed on both sides of the conflict in 2018 alone.
- The Nigeria-based advocacy and research NGO **International Society for Civil Liberties & the Rule of Law (Intersociety)**, however, provides substantially higher figures. They estimate that no less than **2,400** Christian farming community members were killed by Fulani extremists in 2018 with tens of thousands being displaced.
- **Open Doors** estimates even more. They ranked Nigeria 12th in its 2019 World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most dangerous to live as a Christian. Of the 4,136 Christians killed in 2018, Nigeria accounted for **3,731**, according to Open Doors.
- The highest estimate, however, comes from the **Christian Association of Nigeria** and Christian leaders. They reported that as many as **6,000** Christians were killed by radical Fulani during the first six months of 2018. However, **Intersociety** considers **CAN**'s estimate to be unsubstantiated.

The challenge with numbers is that local authorities’ estimates of death tolls from particular attacks often vary with those of community organisations. The police and local government sometimes put out lower death tolls intentionally in order to prevent reprisal attacks. Factual evidence is therefore hard to come by and statistics often depend on the organisations that provide it and what they hope to achieve. But there is no doubt that there is an incremental escalation in violence, both in numbers and also in intensity.

Numbers, however, should not determine our care nor our compassion. If it was one Christian that died through the violent acts of others, the Church should exhibit the same display of compassion as for 6,000.

3. WHAT ROLE DO CHRISTIAN FARMERS PLAY IN THE CONFLICT?

While much of what is reported internationally focuses on the atrocities committed by Fulani people against farming communities, attacks against Fulani herding communities have regrettably, but understandably, also occurred.

As outlined in an extensive December 2018 research report derived from over 262 interviews by **Amnesty International** chronicling attacks on both Fulani and farming communities, attacks against Fulani communities can be as horrifying and deadly as attacks committed against the Christian farming communities.

But as Christian human rights groups have argued, there are disproportionately more attacks against farming communities than there are against Fulani communities.



Amnesty International stated in its December 2018 report that “both sides in the conflict have increasingly sought to destroy each other’s livelihood with herders setting fire to farms and farmers engaging in cattle rustling.”

While there have been many estimates on the number of people killed on both sides and some estimates on the number of people killed by Fulani, statistics on Fulani community members killed by the farming community in 2018 have been difficult to establish.

According to the **Global Terror Index of 2018**, Bachama (Christian) militants were the third deadliest terror group in Nigeria in 2017 behind Fulani extremists and Boko Haram. But the index reports Bachama militants as being responsible for only 30 deaths and four attacks. The Amnesty International report, meanwhile, suggests the death toll in 2017 could be higher than what the index estimates.

One interviewer told **The Christian Post** that while reprisal attacks from the farming communities have occurred, they are far less common than Fulani attacks on farming villages. He added that there isn’t much data available on the number of attacks or the number of people who’ve been killed in attacks on Fulani villages but estimated that only one reprisal attack occurs from a farming community for every 20 attacks committed by Fulani extremists. He also stressed that acts of reprisal from farming communities are rare because farmers usually lack the weaponry that some of the herders possess.

4. IS THERE A RELIGIOUS ELEMENT OR IS THIS SIMPLY A “FARMER-HERDER” CONFLICT?

For many Africans, the local tribe is the primary source of identity. Not only do tribal alliances determine customs, lifestyle, culture, dress, language and food, they also determine religion. It is more a matter of “who you are” than “what you believe”. The Fulanis are Muslim by tribe and the Bachama are Christian by tribe. The intricacies of tribal alliances therefore make it impossible to simply focus on one component of tribal life when it comes to interaction with other tribes.

It has been calculated that there are over 800 different tribal and linguistic groups across Nigeria. A recent book by journalist **Rima Shawulu Kwewum**, for instance, calculates that Bauchi State – the seventh largest of Nigeria’s 37 states – has ninety ethnic groups and nationalities, while Adamawa and Taraba States have over a hundred.



The Gatestone Institute states: “Nowhere is tribal attachment stronger than in the polyglot southern areas of Northern Nigeria – the ‘Middle Belt’ of the country which was first tentatively claimed as a separate collective entity as long ago as the 1930s. Comprising mainly Christian and traditional African tribes, ‘Middle Belters’ – who are found indigenous in even the most northerly Sharia states of Borno, Yobe and Kebbi – have increasingly asserted their ethnic distinctiveness, and rejected northern Fulani/Hausa hegemony with its second class dhimmi status for non-Muslims.”

However, the role of religious influences as a major component of tribal life cannot be underestimated and should not be ignored. Open Doors researcher Yonas Demebele reports that the pattern of Fulani violence in the region — their use of military-grade weapons to drive Christians off the land and to occupy it, the destruction of Christian homes and churches, and their call for the imposition of Islamic law, among other hallmarks — amounts to “ethnic cleansing of the ‘Middle Belt’”. “The campaign,” he argues, “is animated by the same ambition that drives Boko Haram: to bring the non-Islamic world under Islamic rule.”

Stephen Enada – who co-founded the nongovernmental organisation **International Committee on Nigeria** after fleeing Nigeria to the US in 2016 following the death of his cousin at the hands of Fulani extremists – explains: “It is really simplifying catastrophic incidents in Nigeria by saying ‘herder-farmer conflict’ and that does not solve the problem.” Enada feels that the labels of ‘farmer-herder conflict’ and ‘land disputes’ “indulge the killers and perpetrators”. “Are there not farmers in the northern part of the country dominated by Muslims?” he asked. “Why are they targeting the Christians? Why are they burning the churches and things like that?”

Enada believes that the Fulani extremists involved in the attacks on villages are Islamic “jihadists” who have been radicalised and are looking to drive out Christians from the towns. He also said that there have been numerous instances in the past where Fulani have renamed rural Christian lands with Arabic or Islamic names.

There is no doubt that religion continues to add fuel to a highly volatile situation and a severely polarised community. There is also no doubt that religion is not the only factor contributing to the acts of violence. It is therefore paramount that when the Church reports on these matters it needs to take all factors into consideration and not simply take one component and pursue it with a Christian agenda.

5. WHAT HAS BEEN DONE TO STOP THE ATROCITIES?

One thing that people can agree on is that the Nigerian government and security forces have not done nearly enough to hold perpetrators of the killing and razing in the ‘Middle Belt’ – on either side – accountable. According to several sources, no (or very few) perpetrators of the killings in the ‘Middle Belt’ have been arrested or tried for their crimes. All role-players agree that the federal government must do more to ensure that a security force is in place, capable of providing proper security and apprehending perpetrators to face justice in fair trials.

But although there's been a lack of accountability, there have been some positive signs when the federal and local governments tried to enact policy solutions that could fix the problem. In Benue State, a law banning open grazing was passed that required cattle herders to adopt ranches. However, nomads contested the law, arguing that open grazing is part of their nomadic culture.

At a federal level, the government tried to put a policy in place aimed at securing land to reserve for open grazing. But since the Nigerian government already had such broad authority when it comes to land decisions, there was huge pushback because citizens were already angry that the government has such broad power to take over their lands.

Although some believe that climate change could be partly responsible for the increased migration of Fulani to the ‘Middle Belt’, there are also those who believe that the climate change narrative is “cooked up by the central government of Nigeria to escape responsibility or divert world attention over the butchery.”

In the end, the only viable long-term solution would need to include accountability and prosecution of perpetrators in order to reduce the number of violent attacks and ensure that people don't retaliate thereafter.

CONCLUSION

As believers, we have a mandate to pray for our brothers and sisters who suffer under the yoke of persecution in Nigeria and our hearts bleed for those who have suffered immeasurable hardship. We do this in our churches, in our meetings and in our fellowships. We weep before the Lord as we remember that if one member suffers, we all suffer (1 Chronicles 12:26).

This is non-negotiable.

However, in public, and especially on social media, Proverbs 31:8-9 reminds us to "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of **ALL** who are destitute [Fulani and Bachama]... speak up and judge fairly; to defend the rights of the poor and needy."

We also have a mandate to pray for the lost and the unreached, and in the words of Christ Himself, for those who "persecute us" (Matthew 5:44). We should guard our hearts not to demonise people and stir up hatred and fear, regardless of their acts. As Christians, we should move into the next realm of a 'Christ-consciousness' – we need to be more zealous about the injustice in the 'Middle Belt' of Nigeria than simply focusing only on the persecution of Christians. By emphasising one group as the 'victim' and another group as the 'aggressor', the Church unfortunately contributes to the polarisation of the community.

Where injustice prevails, Christians should speak up, regardless of tribe, race, religion or nationality. We serve a God who is not only concerned about Christians that are persecuted, but about justice as a principle. He is a God of justice who seeks justice for all. That is ultimately the message of the cross.

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