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NIGERIA Estimated 40 dead in Christmas Day attacks in five states

Over 40 people are thought to have died in a series of Christmas Day bomb and gun attacks that targeted churches and members of the security services in five states in northern and central Nigeria. The Islamist militia Boko Haram has claimed responsibility for the attacks, which occurred in Niger, Plateau, Yobe, Adamawa and Borno States.

The majority of fatalities occurred at St Theresa's Catholic Church in Madalla, Niger State, where bombers in a vehicle hurled explosives at the congregation at the end of mass. Sources told Christian Solidarity Worldwide-Nigeria (CSW-N) that the priest had asked parishioners to stay a little longer for Christmas souvenirs. Those who did not remain for the ceremony were caught up in the blast.

At least 35 people died in the Madalla bombing, with scores more suffering various degrees of injury, some potentially fatal. CSW-N was informed that in several cases the blast claimed entire families, some of whom were burnt beyond recognition in their cars. In the case of one family, the sole survivor was a thirteen year-old girl called Chidinma, who had not attended church that day.

The next explosions targeted a Mountain of Fire Ministries church in Murtala Mohammad Way in the Plateau state capital, Jos. The bombers were on foot because the state government had temporarily banned the use of unregistered motorcycles for this very reason. The first device destroyed a large building outside the church. However, a police patrol was passing by just as the bombers threw the second, which hit a wall and destroyed a few cars. Four culprits, reportedly Muslims from the Gangare area, were apprehended following a fire fight in which a policeman was injured and later died. There were no other casualties, and two more locally made explosives were allegedly recovered nearby and disarmed.

Multiple explosions were reported next from Damaturu, capital of Yobe State, where fighting between security forces and Boko Haram had claimed over 60 lives earlier in the week. Most significantly, a suicide bomber detonated a car bomb outside the offices of the State Security Service (SSS), killing three SSS men. In a subsequent attack on a church in Gadaka, a town approximately 155 km west of Damaturu, gunmen set ablaze five cars as worshippers fled, but no lives were reported lost.

A bomb exploded at a hotel in Mubi in Adamawa State injuring one person, but other bombs planted around three churches were reportedly disarmed. In the Wasin Umurari area of Maiduguri, capital of Borno State, six people died in an attack launched by suspected Boko Haram gunmen.

Following the attacks, many Christians lamented the fact that their security is no longer guaranteed in northern and central Nigeria. Some are even beginning to avoid church gatherings for fear of being bombed.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "The Christmas Day bombings were appalling and cowardly attacks on innocent families who were merely expressing their faith on one of the most significant dates in the Christian calendar. Our thoughts and prayers are with the family and friends of the victims, and with Christians throughout the region who understandably feel increasingly vulnerable. Clearly, while security is tight in Abuja, Madalla and other satellite towns to the capital have become alternative soft

targets and require urgent additional protection. The continuing insecurity in Yobe and Borno States is also deeply worrying, as are the reported attacks in Adamawa. It is vital that federal and state authorities spare no effort in pursuing, capturing and prosecuting funders and perpetrators of this violence, no matter how highly placed they may be. The bombings are a serious threat to freedom of religion in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic state where co-existence is vital. For the sake of national unity, those behind them must not be allowed to prevail."