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## **Niger churches 'abandoned' after Charlie Hebdo destruction**

*6 months since 70 churches destroyed in wake of attacks in Paris*

By Illia Djadi



*In the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, the churches in the predominantly-Muslim West African nation of Niger experienced the worst attacks in their history.*

WorldMonitor (23.07.2015) - On the weekend of 16-17 January, hundreds of angry Islamists attacked and ransacked dozens of properties and churches, shouting "Allahu Akbar" ("Allah is the greatest").

Ten people lost their lives during that weekend; [more than 70 churches were destroyed](#), as well as numerous Christian schools and organisations, including an orphanage. At least 30 Christian homes were also looted and burnt down.

Six months on, the reconstruction work is moving slowly and proving very expensive. Most damaged churches and properties are still not rebuilt, and the financial support promised by the state is not forthcoming.

In the heart of the capital, Niamey, the Baptist "Roundabout" church (founded in 1929) has long symbolised the presence of Protestant Christians in Niger.

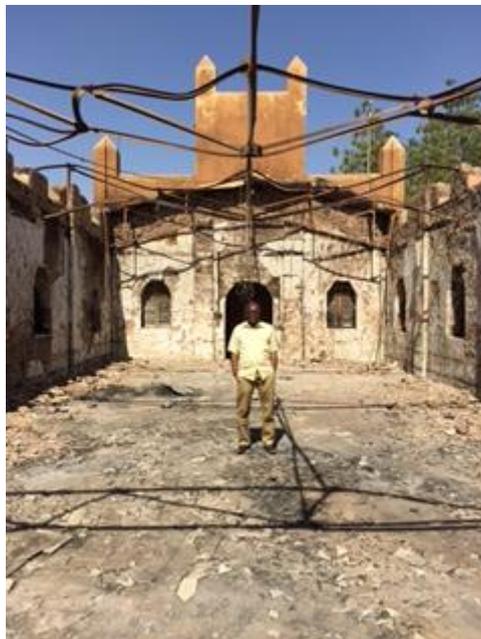
Over the years, it has hosted generations of all geographic and social origins: students, diplomats and businessmen – both expatriates and Nigeriens.

Now its collapsed roof, along with its façade and walls blackened by flames, present a scene of desolation. Puddles on the floor highlight the urgency of repair, particularly as the rainy season begins.

On 17 January, this church was among the first targeted by demonstrators. The motive was said to be anger at the [presence of Niger President Mahamadou Issoufou and five other African heads of state in Paris](#) on 11 January, in what was perceived to be support for an anti-religious magazine. The "memorial" issue of Charlie Hebdo, showing the Prophet Mohammad weeping, reinforced this anger and triggered the protests, which quickly turned into anti-Christian violence.

The protests, which began in Zinder, Niger's second city, on January 16 quickly spread to other parts of the country, including Niamey, the following day.

"Since these incidents, it is as if life had stopped," said Rev. Jacques Kagnindé, leader of the "Roundabout" church. "The church has become a source of curiosity for passers-by and a hide-out for idlers. Unfortunately our current church finances don't allow us to begin the reconstruction."



*His church is still waiting for the financial support promised by the government, so Sunday services and other weekly meetings are held in a tent in the church courtyard.*

There is a sense of abandonment among victims of such violence.

"We feel that, as the emotion of the first days has now passed, our case is no longer of interest to our political leaders," exclaimed pastor Kagnindé.

"They seem more concerned with preparations for the elections [due in 2016] and the fight against Boko Haram. The churches are abandoned to their fate."

At Salama church, in the capital's northern district of Bani Fandou 2, the situation is similar. On January 17, a horde of angry protesters ransacked the church, looting and setting on fire several houses, including the pastor's. A sewing workshop was turned into pieces and its contents, notably 15 sewing machines, were stolen.

Everything is still in need of reconstruction, the pastor, Rev. Zakaria Jadi, told World Watch Monitor.

"It is a blow to our church. For nearly a month, there was neither water nor electricity. We have done our best to allow our worship activities to restart, but we have now reached our limit. The reconstruction work may probably take some time."

The violence also revealed the inability of the security forces to ensure the protection of Christians and their properties. In Niamey, looters roamed across the city on motorbikes, in cars or taxis, without facing any resistance from security forces.

Various sources told World Watch Monitor that there were no forces around the capital's main churches – except the Catholic Cathedral, where a heavy police presence meant it was one of the few to escape attack.

In Zinder, some pointed to a lack of action by local security forces, after messages calling for a demonstration after Friday prayers circulated widely (principally via phone texts) on Thursday, Jan 15.

In both Niamey and Zinder, the violence appears to have been well planned and executed.

"How can one make sense of the fact that, in under two hours, more than 40 churches were destroyed across the capital?" asked a spokesman for Caritas, the Catholic aid agency, on French radio. The absence of firefighters shocked many; fire and smoke were seen in some churches days after the incidents.

[Learn more: Exclusive interview with Bishop Kimso Boureima, President of Niger's Evangelical Alliance](#)



## *Lack of support*

Apart from the material needs, estimated at hundreds of thousands of US dollars, the victims of the violence are in great need of psychological support. According to a survey by the US NGO, Samaritan's Purse, based on a sample of 40 respondents, 32 people are suffering from severe trauma, and eight moderate trauma.

For Rev. Jadi, who lost both his house and his church, it was not easy to overcome the pain. On the day of the attack, he just had time to get his family into a safe place.

"When I returned to assess the scale of the damage, I started to step across our remaining personal belongings along the way, such as books, kitchen utensils and clothes.

"I felt very bad, such an indescribable feeling when I saw my ripped-up Bible on the ground. For a pastor, it was like my entire life was torn apart. I could not stop shedding tears."

But now, Jadi has forgiven and wants to move forward.

"It was truly hurting, but I was well supported by brothers and sisters who have encouraged me a lot. And I received my greatest encouragement from God, he has really strengthened me in order to overcome that ordeal. And he also allowed me to support those who were in tears.

"This painful experience shows also how it is not good for a man to place all his hope in the things of this world. If my life consisted of material belongings, maybe I would not be here today?"

For Ruth, his wife, the healing process has been slower, he said.

"Almost every time we enter the church compound and she sees what used to be our home, it reminds her of the painful memories. She almost always ends up shedding tears. But by the grace of God, since last Sunday (12 July), she felt relieved and was able to share her testimony at church."

Rev. Samaila Labo, pastor of the Evangelical Church of the Niger Republic in the northern Niamey district of Boukoki 2, also lost his house and his church.

The church had hoped to get a new roof, Rev. Labo told World Watch Monitor, but such was the extent of the damage, the whole church needed to be completely rebuilt.

Reconstruction will be long and expensive, he said. "This is why the church decided to build a temporary chapel with solid materials that resist rain and weather."

The provisional chapel was inaugurated on Sunday, 12 July, to his great satisfaction.

"It's a great relief for me to see our members protected from rain and wind. This has also challenged us, that we will not stop our efforts until we rebuild our damaged church."

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## **Recent violence in Niger shows growing intolerance among religious groups**

World (28.01.2015) - Mixed emotions were evident as members of the Christian community in Niger gathered for their services on Sunday, Jan 25, 2015. Some were full of joy to get back to church; others could barely hide their sorrow.

A week ago, the church bells remained silent. Ten people died during that weekend; more than 70 churches were destroyed, along with numerous Christian schools and organizations, including an orphanage. Over 30 Christian homes were believed to be looted and burnt down. Those affected say the violence left them with "only the clothes on our backs".

It was significant for churches to resume their services of praise and worship, the President of the Evangelical Alliance in Niger (AMEEN) Rev Kimso Boureima told World Watch Monitor.

"It was important because a Christian who lives alone is not strengthened in his faith. As the Bible teaches, we are encouraged when we're together... It's also an occasion to show the ability of the Church to face trials, because after what happened Christians are in great need of spiritual support".

Local sources reported that many churches across the capital set up tents and chairs to hold their services. The worshippers sang, prayed and encouraged each other, some having to stand the whole time.

In the far south-eastern city of Zinder, where the violence started on Friday 16th, there was also a strong desire to overcome fear and to move forward - despite uncertainty about the future, particularly from some who lost their properties.

"The messages of exhortation have encouraged Christians in their faith, in order to move forward. Because, as the Bible says, we don't have "a spirit of fear and timidity, but a spirit of power and of wisdom", said Rev. Boureima.

"Certainly this is a great trial, but Jesus promised that he will be with us until the end of time. That's why it was necessary to bring our people back to the Scriptures, and let them apply those Scriptures in their lives, despite the difficulties of the moment."

The Sunday services were full of emotion and sorrow; some worshippers burst into tears. There was also fear. But it was later somewhat dissipated by the presence of police near various places of worship, which helped to reassure the congregations.

The anti-Christian violence, condemned by the authorities and the Islamic Council of Niger among others, had come as a surprise in this Sahel country. It's been known till now for its relatively peaceful religious cohabitation, even though more than 98% of Niger's 17 million inhabitants are Muslim.

The motive for the protesters was said to be anger at the presence of Niger President Mahamadou Issoufou in Paris, along with five other African Heads of State, on Jan 11, 2015. The issue of the magazine 'Charlie Hebdo', showing the Prophet Mohamed weeping, reinforced this anger and triggered the protest, which quickly turned into anti-Christian violence.

Still, Christians in Niger had "nothing to do with 'Charlie Hebdo'", observe many Nigeriens, who expressed sympathy for their minority Christian community on social media. One called young Muslims to join Christians to clean up and restore their places of worship and their properties.

### ***Growing radical Islam***

The anti-Christian violence is the expression of a growing intolerance in Niger society, aggravated by the rise of Islamism, note analysts.

From the 1990s Niger's socio-cultural landscape has changed dramatically, with some radical Islamist groups advocating a rigorous interpretation of Islam, opposed to the tolerant form of Islam widely known in Niger. Izala, the most active Salafist group in Niger, came from neighboring Nigeria.

Protesters' actions in Zinder (c.100km from the Nigeria border) reminded locals of ongoing Boko Haram violence there. Protesters attacked the symbols of the West, including the French Cultural Centre, and burned down the French flag. The black and white jihadist flag was said to be seen flying in Zinder, something never seen in Niger before. The Christian minority, often associated with Westerners, became a primary target.

Anti-Christian violence has increased sharply in Niger in recent years, from one incident in 1998 and two in 2000 - both in Maradi, also close to the Nigeria border. The latest violence is seen as history repeating itself: in September 2012, a protest against the American film "The Innocence of Muslims" served as a pretext for ransacking three churches in Zinder.

The phenomenon of growing Islamism in Niger was recognised in constitutional changes in 1991 and 1996, as several radical groups campaigned for the introduction of sharia law in Niger. Today, more and more women are veiled, amidst a cultural transformation unknown by Nigeriens some years ago.

### ***Widespread poverty***

For many, the Jan 16-17 attacks are the direct result of social and economic malaise fuelled by widespread poverty. Despite its mineral resources - uranium and, more recently, oil - Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world. Opposition parties, calling for a demonstration a day after the anti-Christian violence, accused President Issoufou of not doing enough to address youth unemployment, corruption and so on.

WWM has learned that most of the Jan 16-17 demonstrations offered an opportunity to unemployed youths - known locally as 'idlers' - to attack Christian properties and places of worship, seen as easy prey. They moved in small groups, looting before setting fire to their targets.

Stolen objects and personal items were reported to be seen at Katako, a popular market in the capital Niamey - where nearly everything can be bought or sold, regardless of origin.

### ***The fragility of the state***

The violence also revealed the inability of the security forces to ensure the protection of Christians and their properties. In Niamey, 'protester-looters' operated across the city on motorbikes, in cars, and often by taxi, without facing any resistance from security forces.

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In both Niamey and Zinder, the violence appears to have been well planned and executed.

"How can one make sense of the fact that - in under two hours - more than 40 churches were destroyed across the capital?" asked a spokesman for Caritas, the Catholic aid agency, on French radio. The absence of firefighters shocked many; fire and smoke were seen in some churches days after the incidents.

Although Niger's President and Prime Minister met church representatives to condemn the violence and declared three days of mourning for those who died, neither have yet visited any attack site.

AMEEN condemned the attacks but called for forgiveness.

"Let us ask Christians to grant forgiveness to their relatives, neighbours and ethnic brothers who took part in these painful events."

Calling for peaceful coexistence among Niger's population, AMEEN expressed its "profound gratitude to all Muslims...who spontaneously brought their aid by protecting Christians, their places of worship and sheltering homeless families".

Catholic Bishops issued a similar message to Muslims in Niger. "We are united in the pain that you share with us. Our places of worship, and most of our infrastructure have been destroyed but our faith is intact."

The Catholic Church has suspended all activities, affecting thousands of children in its schools. 100 expat Christian workers have moved from Zinder to Niamey for security; some have left the country.

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## **Charlie Hebdo: Niger protesters set churches on fire**

BBC News (17.01.2015) - At least three people have been killed and six churches attacked in Niger amid fresh protests against French magazine Charlie Hebdo's cartoon depicting the Prophet Muhammad.

Protests began outside Niamey's grand mosque and reportedly spread to other parts of the country, a day after five were killed in Niger's second city.

Niger's president condemned the violence and appealed for calm.

Last week, Islamist gunmen killed 12 people at Charlie Hebdo's offices.

The cover of the magazine's latest edition, published after the attack, featured a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad weeping while holding a sign saying "I am Charlie".

Seven million copies of the edition are being printed in view of extraordinary demand, distributors announced on Saturday. The magazine's print run before the attack was 60,000.

Many Muslims see any depiction of Islam's prophet as offensive.

In Niger, a former French colony, hundreds of demonstrators gathered at Niamey's grand mosque, shouting "God is Great" in Arabic.

At least six churches were set on fire or looted in Niamey and regional towns. Bars, hotels and businesses under non-Muslim ownership were also targeted.

Two charred bodies were recovered from a church on the outskirts of Niamey, and the body of a woman was found in a bar, Reuters reported.

'Everything has gone'

Pastor Zakaria Jadi, whose church was burnt down in the capital Niamey, said he was in a meeting with church elders when he heard of the attacks.

"I just rushed and told my colleagues in the church to take away their families from the place," he told the BBC World Service. "I took my family to take them out from the place. When I came back I just discovered that everything has gone. There's nothing in my house and also in the church."

Niger's President, Mahamadou Issoufou, was one of six African heads of state to attend a unity march in Paris after the attacks against Charlie Hebdo.

"Those who loot these places of worship, who desecrate them and kill their Christian compatriots... have understood nothing of Islam," he said after Saturday's violence.

During Friday's demonstration in Niger's second city, Zinder, protesters raided shops run by Christians and attacked the French cultural centre.

The centre's director, Kaoumi Bawa, said an angry crowd of around 50 people had smashed the building's door and set fire to the cafeteria, library and offices.

The death toll in Zinder rose from four to five when emergency services found a burned body inside a Catholic Church.

Protests against the Charlie Hebdo cartoon were also seen on Friday in [Pakistan, where protests turned violent in Karachi](#), the Sudanese capital of Khartoum and the Algerian capital, Algiers.

People in Somalia took to the streets on Saturday

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