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Islamists want to 'wipe out' Christian presence in northern Mali

WWM (02.09.2014) - It's not only in the Middle East that the advance of Islamist jihadists is exercising the international community. While attention has been focused on Northern Iraq and Syria, the French government has been bombing Islamist militant positions in Africa to stop the emergence of jihadists in the Sahel. Now on 1st Sep, peace talks about the future of northern Mali start again between the government and mainly Tuareg armed groups.

[For nearly a year in 2012 armed Islamist groups had ruled the region, banning the practice of other religions and desecrating and looting churches and other places of worship.](#) Thousands, including many Christians, fled the occupation and found refuge in the south of the country or in neighboring countries such as Niger and Burkina Faso. On January 11 2013, French troops moved to regain control of the region after militants had attempted to progress further south, but the re-establishment of security took time and necessitated mass reconstruction, as many displaced people returned home. As government and [international organizations - including UNESCO](#) - have undertaken to rebuild destroyed infrastructure, and notably the mausoleums and ancient monuments, Christians in Mali say that their loss is not being taken into account.

Dr Mohamed Ibrahim Yattara is the President of the Baptist Church, mainly present in Northern Mali. He expressed his feelings to World Watch Monitor.

WWM

What's your reaction to the reconstruction efforts undertaken in Northern Mali, when, as you tell us, it doesn't include the damage sustained by Churches during the jihadists' occupation?

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We are outraged by this policy of double standards. We do not understand why a UN Agency can rebuild mausoleums, which are still used as mosques, where people go to pray, while when it comes to churches, nothing is done - despite all our efforts to sensitize the government and international organizations.

So do you feel that you have been overlooked?

The facts speak for themselves. So far nothing has been done. All indications are that the cake has already been shared. Unfortunately, we do not have our share.

Does this mean that in the end, you will have to rely on your own means?

In fact this is what we have always done. Historically, churches were built by nationals. But we had hoped that, because of the particular circumstances of a post-conflict situation, our government and international community could help us in the reconstruction effort. But if that support does not come from outside, we will continue to do what we did in the past: to rely on our own resources.

Do you really have this capacity?

Actually, with regard to the current post-conflict situation, we have no means to undertake reconstruction projects. We can only rely on the generosity of people of good will to walk with us in these efforts of reconstruction.

What is the real extent of the damage sustained by Churches?

We have engaged the evaluation process aimed at assessing the scale of the damage. But we already knew that the loss sustained by Christians in the north amounted to hundreds of millions. We have lost most of our buildings but also vehicles and other objects of inestimable value. The churches are in ruins: in Gao, in Niafounké, in Hombori and other towns occupied by jihadists. In Timbuktu, for example, in addition to buildings, our 'Water Project' set up over a period of 20 years, and which has cost billions, is no longer operational, because all the materials were stolen. This constitutes a heavy blow to the population, the main beneficiaries of this project.

Is it an exaggeration to say that Islamists attempted to erase the presence of Christianity in northern Mali?

No, we had this feeling that jihadists wanted to wipe out any trace of Christianity in the north of Mali. But God in his goodness has not allowed such an eventuality. The church is still there and most of the believers have returned, albeit in very difficult conditions, without external assistance or the financial resources needed in such circumstances. And despite such adversity we are determined to resume our ministries because after all, this northern Mali is ours. We have the right to freely exercise our faith and we are firmly committed to make this happen.

Further notes

In 2013, Mali was ranked No. 7 on World Watch List, a ranking of the 50 countries where persecution of Christians is most severe. The list is published annually by Open Doors International, a charity supporting Christians worldwide who live under pressure because of their faith.

Bomb scare reignites Christian fear in northern Mali

Congregants forced to meet in school; explosives found nearby

World Watch Monitor (16.01.2014) - Christians in a city in northern Mali, already forced to hold services in a school classroom because their church was looted and not ready to host meetings, had a bomb scare on Sunday (Jan. 14).

Military personnel patrolling the area in Gao on Sunday morning discovered explosives near the school. French army personnel were able to safely defuse the devices and authorities are now investigating, but the incident left church members shocked.

The pastor of the church, whose identity is being withheld to protect his security, told World Watch Monitor there is "insecurity in all aspects of life" at the moment, but that his congregation was refusing to panic.

"I cannot say for sure that the bomb was intended to hurt us Christians," he said. "I only know that the location of the bomb was right next to our place of worship and also a route frequently used by the military."

It is just over a year now since French troops ousted the Tuareg-led Islamist group, which had taken over northern Mali and declared independence, aiming to impose Islamic law on cities such as Gao.

On January 11 last year, French troops moved to regain control of the region after the Islamist militants had attempted to progress further south.

For nearly a year, the armed Islamist groups had ruled the region, banning the practice of other religions and desecrating and looting churches and other places of worship.

Thousands, including many Christians, fled the occupation and found refuge in the south of the country or in neighbouring countries such as Niger and Burkina Faso.

After the French helped the Malian forces to regain control of the region, the re-establishment of security took time and necessitated mass reconstruction, as many displaced people returned home.

A number of public buildings were destroyed during the conflict, including schools, health clinics, ancient monuments, hotels and restaurants.

The pastor of the church in Gao told World Watch Monitor that around 50 members of his congregation have returned home in recent months.

"We came back because we want to revive the testimony of Christ here in our hometown," he said. "Despite the insecurity in all aspects of life, we want everyone to return here and together to work for our God who loves us so much."

Mali fell from 7th to 33rd on the 2014 World Watch List, which ranks the 50 countries where practising Christianity is most fraught.

Following the French military intervention last year, "the threat of an Islamist takeover has been averted, at least temporarily", reported this year's World Watch List, which was compiled by Christian charity Open Doors International.

However, the list reports that the presence and infrastructure of Christianity in the north was largely destroyed, and that rebuilding a Christian presence will be difficult because many Christians who fled the north are afraid to return.

"Even though most Malian Christians (constituting less than 5% of the population) live in the south of the country, they feel threatened by Islamists in the north and fear of a new uprising remains," reports the list.
