

Riots Kill at Least 13 in Northern Nigeria, Police Say

From Associated Press

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Bands of Muslims and Christians rioted Saturday in the streets of the northern city of Kano, burning places of worship and looting stores and businesses. At least 13 people were killed, police said.

The latest outbreak of religious violence in northern Nigeria kindled already heated emotions after Muslim fundamentalists clashed Friday with police during a street protest against U.S.-led airstrikes on Afghanistan.

Police Commissioner Yakubu Bello Uba confirmed that 13 people were killed Saturday, including five rioters shot to death by police. He said he had ordered police to shoot protesters and combatants "on sight."

There were unconfirmed reports of many more dead. Eight bodies lay on the streets of Sabon Gari, a neighborhood in the northern part of Kano, an overwhelmingly Muslim city about 500 miles northeast of Nigeria's commercial capital, Lagos.

Dozens of shops and businesses, including several newspaper offices, were looted and destroyed, police and witnesses said. Three churches were at least partially burned, and a mosque was also torched.

More than 100 people were arrested, Bello Uba said by telephone.

Ibrahim Gwawargwa, a spokesman for the Kano state government, blamed the rioting on "hoodlums" who, he said, looted shops owned by "Muslims and Christians alike."

"We have not found any religious aspect to this," he said.

Yet witnesses told of groups of Christian and Muslim rioters screaming religious slogans as they attacked and chased bystanders.

On Galadima Road, a main thoroughfare, a mob chanted "Allahu akbar"-- "God is great"--as they burned down buildings, including the offices of several Nigerian newspapers, said Nathaniel Inku, a journalist with the national daily Vanguard. Inku's office was among those burned.

Some Muslim rioters carried posters of Osama bin Laden, the prime suspect in the Sept. 11 attacks in the United States, witnesses said.

By nightfall, a tense calm was restored to the city as armored vehicles filled with soldiers and police cruised otherwise deserted streets, enforcing a 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. curfew.

Nigeria, with 125 million people, is divided into an overwhelmingly Muslim north and a largely Christian south. Religious tensions have increased since a dozen northern states, including Kano, began imposing Islamic law, or Sharia, last year.

Islamic courts in these states have ordered the hands of thieves amputated, and several women and girls have been publicly flogged for alleged sexual indiscretions.

On Thursday, an Islamic court in Sokoto state sentenced a pregnant woman to death by stoning for having premarital sex, court officials said.