

Muslim cult raises fears of terrorism in Nigeria

REBELLION: A small group of Islamist dissidents, who had set up a ramshackle haven from the raucous bustle of life in Nigeria's worldly cities, recently turned violent

AFP , KANAMMA, NIGERIA

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The Islamic Muhajirun movement could not have chosen a more remote portion of Nigeria's otherwise densely populated territory in which to mount its futile rebellion against the secular state.

During the four-hour cross-country drive from Yobe State's capital Damaturu to Kanamma, flat savannah dotted with gnarled baobab trees gradually gives way to the sand dunes, rock and thorny scrub along Nigeria's northern border.

Last year, a 50- to 60-strong group of Muslim dissidents made the trip, hoping to escape from the raucous bustle of life in Nigeria's worldly cities and build a life based on purist Islamic ideals in the Sahel semi-desert.

Now, there are nine fresh graves and a detachment of Nigerian soldiers in Kanamma village, after a week-long uprising in which the rebels torched police stations, seized assault rifles and tried to storm the state capital. Almost all are now dead or in custody, although a handful of them have melted back into the cosmopolitan world they despise, officials say.

The Muhajirun may have wanted to hide themselves away, but their bloody defeat triggered a blaze of headlines and raised fears of the danger that a Taliban-style Islamist movement could pose to Nigeria's stability.

In truth, the tiny, ill-prepared movement seems never to have presented much of a danger to anyone but themselves and Kanamma's perplexed villagers. But the anger which drove this group of educated young men to abandon the comforts of home and school and seek to eke out a life in the harsh landscape around Kanamma could yet breed new uprisings, Muslim leaders warn.

"We'd never seen anyone like these people in the village before," Kanamma's traditional chief, Alhaji Burem Lawan, told a reporter who visited him in his gloomy compound of one-storey mud-brick buildings.

"They said you only have to live by Allah, in the way that they believe in Him," he said. While the villagers are also Muslim they did not share the Muhajirun's interpretation of the faith, he explained.

"They were educated men, some of them graduates. They spoke different languages; Igbo, Kanuri, Hausa, Fulani even Yoruba," his son, Gordo, said.

According to Nigerian officials, the core of the group was made up of young students and graduates, who abandoned their studies in the northeastern city of Maiduguri in order to dedicate themselves to fundamentalist Islam. Around five months ago they began to trickle into the border area, initially setting up a makeshift settlement near the far-flung village of Termuwa, 35km from Kanamma, villagers said.

"When they came they didn't come to the village chief to ask for permission. When we approached them, they said the land belonged to God and the water belonged to God," Gordo said. "We weren't interacting with them at all."

Muhajirun members seem to have been unprepared for life in the desert. They didn't farm and rigged up only temporary homes under trees from brushwood and mosquito netting, Gordo said.

On Dec. 24 the group descended on a small island in a seasonal river a short distance outside Kanamma, and set up a new camp.

A few days later -- for reasons still unclear -- they stormed the village police station armed with catapults and bows and arrows, killing one officer, driving two others away and seizing at least one assault rifle.

When police and military reinforcements were sent to the area, the group reacted by burning down the homes of three local officials.

Around 30 villagers were kidnapped at gunpoint and forced to dig protective trenches on the Muhajirun's island base, all the while being urged to pray with them and accept their vision of Islam, Gordo and his father said.

On New Year's Eve they scrawled "Taliban" on a captured jeep and set off for Damaturu, 150km away, burning a local government compound and raiding a police station armory en route.

The military response was uncompromising. The Muhajirun were driven back from Damaturu and flushed out of Kanamma. Nine were shot dead and later buried in the village, Gordo said.

At least 47 others have since been arrested, seven of them picked up trying to cross the border into Niger. Villagers in neighboring Borno State shot dead seven fleeing rebels. The uprising has come to an abrupt end.

In Yobe State, officials insist that the fighting should be seen as an isolated incident, but some Muslim leaders warned that the Muhajirun's extreme reaction was a symptom of broader dissatisfaction among Nigerian youth.

Ibrahim Datti Ahmad, the influential head of the Islamist pressure group the Supreme council for Shariah, said that educated but unemployed young Muslim men are boiling with anger over corrupt rule in their country.

"These are very sophisticated youth. They are not just the trash that is in government," he said of the "Taliban" rebels.

"I can understand why they did it. I'm not in a position to say whether I support it or not, but they must have their reasons," he said.

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