

AFRICA CRISIS

FEBRUARY 8, 2007 / 7:29 AM / 12 YEARS AGO

Nigerian Muslim cleric detained over al Qaeda case



MAIDUGURI, Nigeria, Feb 8 (Reuters) - A Muslim cleric has been detained in northeastern Nigeria in connection with a man accused of taking \$300,000 from al Qaeda to assist a group called the Nigerian Taliban, officials said on Thursday.

The cleric, Mohammed Yusuf, is a well-known preacher in Maiduguri, capital of Borno state in the country's Muslim-dominated north. Police fanned out in the area around the mosque where he usually preaches as news of his detention filtered out.

"Yusuf is with us and we are taking him to Abuja for a chat. He's already cooperating," said Ruben Amawo, director of the State Security Services, the secret police, in Borno state.

He said Yusuf was a close associate of Muhammed Damagun, a media company director whom prosecutors last month accused of taking money from al Qaeda in 2002 to arrange combat training in Mauritania for 17 members of the Nigerian Taliban.

The case relates to a short-lived spate of attacks in 2003 and 2004 by the self-styled Taliban, a group of reclusive Islamists in the far north of Nigeria with no known connection to the Afghan Taliban.

Yusuf, who often includes anti-Western sentiment in his sermons, was known at the time as a sympathiser of the mysterious group.

The Taliban launched a series of armed attacks on police stations and government offices in Borno and neighbouring Yobe, prompting a fierce military crackdown in which at least 20 people were killed and several others captured.

The group, who said they were fighting for an Islamic state in Africa's top oil producing country, have hardly been heard of since then.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, is split about evenly between Muslims and Christians. The northern half of the country is predominantly Muslim although significant Christian minorities live there.

The two major religions coexist peacefully most of the time although inter-religious violence sometimes breaks out. These conflicts are often intertwined with land, ethnic and political disputes.

Muslim mobs killed about 50 Christians in Maiduguri a year ago in riots sparked by a controversial public hearing over a plan to extend the president's tenure. About 100 Muslims died in reprisal killings in the southern city of Onitsha.

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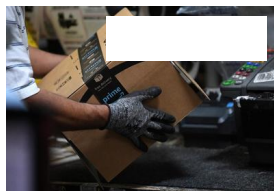
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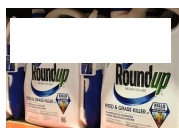
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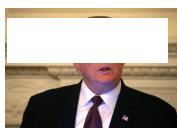
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