

## International

# Farmer-herder violence leaves 3,600 dead in Nigeria: Amnesty

## Government's failure blamed for fuelling violence

**LAGOS:** More than 3,600 people have been killed in clashes between farmers and herders in Nigeria since 2016, Amnesty International said yesterday, blaming the government's failure to punish the perpetrators for fuelling the violence. The international human rights organization said more than 2,000 were killed in 2018 alone, while the bloodshed had made thousands of other people homeless.

Violence between farmers and nomadic herders is on the increase in Nigeria over access to fertile land and water, which is becoming scarce in the face of drought and rapid population growth. "The Nigerian authorities' failure to investigate communal clashes and bring perpetrators to justice has fuelled a bloody escalation in the conflict between farmers and herders across the country, resulting in at least 3,641 deaths in the past three years and the displacement of thousands more," Amnesty said in a statement.

It said that of the 310 attacks recorded between January 2016 and October 2018, 57 percent were in 2018 and were most frequent in Adamawa, Benue, Kaduna, Taraba and Plateau. The rights group also accused Nigerian security forces of not doing enough to stop the killings. "Security forces are often positioned close to the

attacks, which can sometimes last for days, and yet have been slow to act," it said. In some cases, forces were warned of an imminent raid but did nothing to prevent the killings, looting or burning of homes.

"The Nigerian government has displayed what can only be described as gross incompetence and has failed in its duty to protect the lives of its population," said Osai Ojigbo, Nigeria's director of Amnesty International. "Our research shows that these attacks were well planned and coordinated, with the use of weapons like machine guns and AK-47 rifles," Ojigbo said. "In some places, because of the failures of the security forces, competition over resources is used as a pretext to kill and maim along ethnic or religious lines," she said. "The conflict has been dangerously politicized by some state government officials who have inflamed tensions by embarking on a blame game along political party lines."

The Nigerian army yesterday rejected the Amnesty report, accusing the global watchdog of "unfounded allegations against the leadership of the Nigerian military". Army spokesman Sani Usman said in a statement that Nigerians should ignore the report which he said was intended to "destabilise and dismember" the country. "The Nigerian Army has no option than to call for the clo-

sure of Amnesty International offices in Nigeria, if such recklessness continues," he warned. The farmer-herder violence is putting further pressure on President Muhammadu Buhari, who is battling a nine-year insurgency by the Boko Haram jihadist group in the northeast.

The 76-year-old retired general has come under fire for his inability to end the country's security challenges as he seeks a second term in February elections. Boko Haram has stepped up attacks on farmers and loggers in recent months, accusing them of passing information about the group to the military. In the latest attack, four farmers were shot dead as they slept in rice fields in a village outside the Nigerian city of Maiduguri, survivors and local militia said yesterday. Last month, the insurgents killed nine farmers and abducted 12 others in Mammanti village, near Maiduguri.

### Hundreds flee

In another development, hundreds fled late Sunday after Boko Haram burned their homes near Nigeria's northeastern city of Maiduguri, residents said. Boko Haram fighters in several trucks stormed Maiborti village, five kilometers outside Maiduguri, firing indiscriminately and setting fire to homes, they said. A military officer who did not want to be identified said troops and fighter jets

were deployed to the village and scrambled to push out the militants after "fierce battle".

It was not clear if there were casualties in the attack which once again highlighted the fragile security situation in the restive region. "They (Boko Haram) came around 5:30 pm and started firing in the village which made us abandon our homes and flee to Maiduguri," Maiborti resident Abacha Kaka said. Militia leader Babakura Kolo said the jihadists were later forced out of the village by troops with aerial support. "Unfortunately, the terrorists succeeded in setting fire to the village and burning it down completely," he added.

Boko Haram has in recent months launched attacks in a bid to capture Maiduguri, the birthplace of its founder Mohammed Yusuf. Last month, the jihadists attacked Jimmi village just outside the city, killing one person and stealing hundreds of livestock. In April, scores of Boko Haram fighters launched a gun and suicide attack on Jiddari-Polo, outside the city. The Islamist group has attacked at least 20 military bases in recent weeks, killing dozens of soldiers and carting away weapons. Boko Haram's nine-year rebellion has killed at least 27,000 and forced more than two million people to flee their homes. — Agencies

## Powerful blast rips through restaurant in Japan; 42 injured

**TOKYO:** A powerful blast that ripped through a restaurant in northern Japan injured 42 people and caused serious damage to neighboring buildings, forcing some residents into shelters, officials said. The explosion in Sapporo on Sunday night started fires and caused the partial collapse of some surrounding buildings. Images from the scene showed large flames and plumes of smoke rising in the night air, and witnesses described hearing a terrifying boom. The cause of the blast was still under investigation, police said. One witness reportedly said he had smelled gas after the explosion. A police official for the Hokkaido region told AFP that despite the large number of injuries, there had been no fatalities.

The Jiji Press agency said one of those injured was seriously hurt, suffering burns to his face, but none of the victims had life-threatening wounds. Several children were reportedly among those hurt in the explosion. "I heard a 'bang,' which sounded like thunder, and my condo was shaken," a man in his 50s told The Japan Times. "There was an enormous sound, 'bang,' then when I looked up at the sky it was filled with plumes of smoke," an elderly woman said in footage on public broadcaster NHK. The two-story wooden building that housed the restaurant, a real estate agency and a clinic was seriously damaged, a Sapporo fire department official said.

The fire from the blast spread to neighboring



**SAPPORO, Japan:** Firefighters carry on rescue works after an explosion at a restaurant in Sapporo, in the northern Hokkaido prefecture yesterday. — AFP

buildings, and debris blasted out by the explosion shattered the windows of nearby apartments and restaurants, according to local reports. "We are investigating details about the damage together with police at the scene," the official said. National broadcaster NHK said it took firefighters several hours to extinguish the flames, with dozens of vehicles mobilized to deal with the accident. A 26-year-old female employee at the restaurant jumped from the first floor and broke her leg as she tried to escape the fire, media reports said. "I'm just relieved that she is alive," her sister, who rushed to the scene, told the Yomiuri Shimbun newspaper.

The blast happened around 8.30 pm, and the

city government opened a shelter to house dozens of people whose homes were damaged. "The number of evacuees grew to about 60 people around midnight, but now there are 10 people still in the evacuation centre," Sapporo official Yasuhiro Ishizuka said.

The explosion also caused a temporary black-out, with 250 buildings losing electricity, but power was later restored, he said. Many small and medium-sized older buildings in Japan are built partly or entirely from wood and are vulnerable to fires. In February, 11 people were killed in Sapporo after a fire broke out at a home for elderly people with financial difficulties. — AFP

## Rubble and charred cars in jihadist hub

**HAJIN:** Burnt-out cars, craters and collapsed buildings dot the side of a road in the Syrian village of Hajin, after US-backed forces expelled the Islamic State group. The sound of mortar fire and flying bullets resounded inside Hajin on Saturday, as huge clouds of grey smoke billowed over the outskirts of the large village in eastern Syria. The yellow flag of the Syrian Democratic Forces flew above one building, after the Kurdish-led fighters seized the village from IS jihadists on Friday. "Hajin has come under the control of our forces," SDF commander Zano Awaz said. "We are now fighting on the outskirts of Hajin and we are preparing to enter nearby villages," he said in Kurdish, a shot of white in his short black hair.

"We will finish off this terrorist group," Hajin lies on the east bank of the Euphrates in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor, about 30 kilometers (18 miles) from the border with Iraq. The village's capture marks a milestone in a massive and costly operation backed by a US-led coalition to expel IS from eastern Syria. On Saturday, armored vehicles brought in SDF fighters to reinforce the front lines outside Hajin, as coalition planes and helicopters flew overhead. An SDF fighter sitting on the top of a vehicle with fellow combatants flashed a victory sign.

### Tunnels and trenches

The Kurdish-led SDF launched an offensive in September to expel IS from a pocket including its main village Hajin, but their advance has been fraught with obstacles. "We've been facing a lot of difficulties: IS car bombs, suicide attackers. Most of them are foreign," Awaz said. On Saturday morning, IS launched a counterattack, but the SDF said it succeeded in repelling them with the back-

ing of coalition air strikes. Since the start of the operation on September 10, at least 930 jihadists and more than 540 SDF fighters have been killed, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor said.

In addition, more than 320 civilians have lost their lives, many in coalition air strikes, according to the Observatory. The coalition has however repeatedly denied targeting civilians. But no civilians were visible in Hajin on Saturday, after thousands fled the village and nearby areas. A convoy of armored cars ferried in US soldiers, churning up dust along the way. On a hill that used to act as the village cemetery, tunnels and trenches dug by the jihadists lay covered in sheets and colorful blankets. Bullet and artillery shell casings covered the ground.

### 'Death is their destiny'

SDF fighter Bahouz, who did not give his last name, remembered first entering the district's hospital. He said he took pictures of the dead jihadists he saw there. "They think they'll go to paradise, but we killed them," he said, carrying a gun and hand grenades around his waist. "Death is their destiny as they destroyed everything." IS swept across large swathes of Syria and neighboring Iraq in 2014, implementing their brutal interpretation of Islamic law in areas they controlled. But they have since seen their dream of a state crumble, as they have lost most of that territory to various offensives.

In Syria, IS fighters are holding out in what remains of the pocket that once included Hajin, including the villages of Al-Shaafa and Sousa. They have also retained a presence in the vast Badia desert, but that front is managed by Russia-backed regime forces. According to the Observatory, a total of 17,000 SDF fighters are involved in the fight to seize the eastern pocket, compared to around 2,000 jihadists. Inside Hajin village, SDF fighter Mohammed al-Mohammed said his spirits were high. "There's only a bit left" to capture from IS, said the 19-year-old. "We will head on to Al-Shaafa and Sousa to liberate them and win, God willing." — AFP



**HAJIN, Syria:** Smoke billows after bombings in the Deir Ezzor province as a vehicle of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) stops in Hajin, in the Deir Ezzor province, eastern Syria. — AFP

## Turkey revives the ghosts of Gezi protests; Elections loom

**ISTANBUL:** Three years after she was acquitted over her role in Turkey's Gezi Park protests, Mucella Yapici was called in last month by police to face more questions about the unrest that had posed a direct challenge to the authority of President Tayyip Erdogan. Yapici is one of dozens who were involved in demonstrations that brought millions onto Turkey's streets in 2013 to protest against the government and who are now caught up in a renewed investigation, raising concerns among Turkey's Western allies. Opposition figures say the renewed crackdown is designed to polarise public opinion and rally support for Erdogan's AK Party ahead of local elections in March, when it could face tight races in some of Turkey's largest cities.

"It is a political manoeuvre," Yapici said of her questioning two weeks ago. "We were tried in Turkish courts and acquitted. And the state did not appeal," she told Reuters, adding that authorities had produced no new evidence. The moves by prosecutors and police have been accompanied by renewed and sharp criticism of the Gezi protesters by Erdogan. Such attacks have been a hallmark of his election triumphs since he first won power 16 years ago. But they also risk alienating allies such as the

European Union and United States at a time when Turkey is trying to resolve diplomatic disputes that helped fuel a currency crisis this year.

Yapici, a 67-year-old architect whose activist group Taksim Solidarity was at the heart of the Gezi protests, was one of 26 defendants acquitted in April 2015 of charges carrying jail terms of up to 13 years. She said the investigations were an attempt to rewrite social memory of the protests. "They are trying to blacken the clear celebration of democracy that was Gezi in the minds of children, youths and society," Yapici said. She has not been charged again, but last month more than a dozen people were detained as part of an investigation into the Gezi protests and prosecutors have issued warrants for a prominent journalist and an actor, both living abroad.

"Five years later the prosecutor has suddenly remembered the Gezi resistance and started a new witch hunt," the Berlin-based journalist, Can Dundar, said after details of his arrest warrant emerged on Dec. 5. A senior Turkish official said the Gezi incidents were solely a matter for the courts. "Of course the government does not make any requests in this respect," he told Reuters. "Ultimately courts and prosecutors take various steps in cases based on the evidence which they obtain." "It is not a matter of the incidents specially being put onto the agenda five years later," he added. "Ultimately the judiciary will take up these dossiers and reach the necessary verdicts." According to government estimates, 3.6 million people took part in the Gezi protests, which began with a small demonstration against the redevelopment of a park near Istanbul's Taksim Square. — Reuters

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