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200 dead in religious clashes as Nigerian government marks anniversary

May 25, 2000

Web posted at: 3:32 a.m. EDT (0732 GMT)

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[KADUNA, Nigeria](#) -- A shadow has been cast over next week's first anniversary of the end of military rule in Nigeria after an upsurge in communal violence left an estimated 200 dead in the city of Kaduna.

However, many northerners and political analysts suggest that the two days of clashes this week, between the mostly Christian ethnic minorities and Muslim Hausa-Fulani, seem more narrowly focused than February riots that killed up to 2,000.

"It appears that people who suffered losses in the February fighting are taking advantage of the current unrest to carry out revenge attacks," one Kaduna resident said.

The elected government of President Olusegun Obasanjo, which marks its first year in office on May 29, has been plagued by religious and ethnic violence. But it played down the latest clashes, even though soldiers were deployed as soon as fighting broke out on Monday.

Minister says that situation is now 'calm'

Jerry Gana, Nigeria's Information Minister, did not even refer to the Kaduna clashes when briefing journalists after Wednesday's regular Cabinet meeting, until prompted.



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"Security reports confirm that the situation is now calm," he said.

The latest clashes in Kaduna were followed by tension in Aba, where two militant youths were killed on Tuesday in a clash between police and supporters of the failed breakaway republic of Biafra.

Police stormed the Aba headquarters of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), which had flown a Biafran flag at a rally on Monday.

Aba remained tense as MASSOB has declared that on May 27 it will relaunch the republic, which was crushed by loyalist federal forces in the late 1960s. The resulting civil war killed about 1 million people.

Gana said the government had taken "adequate security measures to ensure that this group does not disrupt the peace of the nation."

Muslims blamed for death of local man

Fighting broke out on Monday after some residents in the predominantly Christian neighborhood of Narayi blamed Muslims for an earlier killing of a local man, police commissioner Mohammed Shehu said. Armed with clubs, stones and machetes, they attacked and burned the homes of Muslims from the Barnawa community, who quickly launched reprisals.

On Tuesday, the fighting spread to other areas, with the predominantly Christian Tudun Wada neighborhood bearing the brunt of the violence, authorities said.

Kaduna state Gov. Ahmed Mohammed Makarfi met with religious and ethnic leaders on Tuesday and imposed an 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. curfew in a bid to contain the violence.

The February fighting was sparked by plans to implement Islamic law, or sharia, in some northern states. New courts were created under sharia with the power to try criminal cases involving Muslims and mete out punishments.

Sharia supporters have said the laws would apply only to Muslims, but the calls for Islamic law angered and frightened Nigeria's Christians.

The new courts have handed down sentences such as floggings, and a convicted cow thief had his hand amputated.

While the earlier fighting was triggered by calls for sharia, it also was linked to Nigeria's web of ethnic disputes and the north's waning power since democratic rule was instituted.

Southern Nigeria is predominantly Christian, and northern Nigeria is overwhelmingly Muslim. Northerners dominate Nigeria's military and wielded immense power during the 15 years of army rule, which ended with Obasanjo's election last year.

The [Associated Press](#) and [Reuters](#) contributed to this report.

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