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Pastor Blames Islamic Extremism for Nigeria Violence

The President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) blames growing insecurity in his country on Islamic extremists who he said aim to create an Islamic state.

Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor made his comments at a hearing of US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, Sub-committee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights. He called on the United States to declare violent Islamic sect Boko Haram as a terrorist organization.

“There are certain Muslim extremists who believe that Nigeria must be an Islamic nation [and] Boko Haram is the body that is fronting for this group of persons... [Nigeria] has a very well divided population among the two major religions, so it’s not possible to Islamize Nigeria,” said Oritsejafor.

He denied Christians in Nigeria have ever been the aggressors towards other religious groups.

But some observers have sharply criticized religious leaders for failing to find ways of resolving the ongoing violence by the Islamic sect.

Oritsejafor said Christian leaders are working with their counterparts to find a solution to the problem. He called on Muslim leaders to do more than condemn the violence.

“It is important for us to know that the brain behind Boko Haram is an ideology...which comes from clerics. These teachers that promote the ideology of Boko Haram happen to be Islamic teachers and clerics,” said Oritsejafor.

“What we are saying to our Muslim leader friends in the north is for them to reach out to these clerics to help convince these young men that it’s not possible to Islamize Nigeria.”

Some Christians in Nigeria’s south have expressed concern that Pastor Oritsejafor’s comments could generate a backlash from the group. But the CAN leader said it would be a show of weakness if Christians fail to speak up against violence.

“It will be cowardice and it will be totally wrong for us to just be quiet and say being quiet and silent will protect Christians. Anybody who thinks that way definitely is wrong. We must speak out,” said Oritsejafor.

“What I can do as leader of Christians all over Nigeria is to speak out on their behalf, and that is exactly what I’m doing.”

Boko Haram, which translates in the local Hausa language as “Western education is sacrilegious,” claims it is fighting to impose strict Islamic Sharia law and does not recognize Nigeria’s constitution.

Oritsejafor said a majority of Christians have faced the brunt of Boko Haram’s violence.

“There is ethnic religious cleansing taking place; gradually it is happening, and we are looking at it. We expect the international community to join us to speak out,” said Oritsejafor.

He said efforts by Nigeria’s government to end the ongoing violence perpetrated by the Islamic sect has not been adequate.

“I will tell you their best is not good enough becauseallowing churches to be burned and Christians shot at every Sunday for the last month, I don't think that best is best. I think more should be done.”