

In Nigeria, Christians are fleeing violence—and fearing COVID-19

At the Agan Camp for internally displaced persons in Benue State

by [Patrick Egwu](#) in the [July 15, 2020](#) issue



Eunice Amase with two of her children at Agan Camp in Nigeria. (Photo by Patrick Egwu)

Eunice Amase lives with her husband and three children in a makeshift tent at Agan Camp in Benue State, Middle Belt Nigeria. The camp is one of about 20 where internally displaced persons live following bloody conflicts between local farmers and seminomadic cattle herders from northern Nigeria.

In January 2018, 83 people in the region were killed and about 100,000 were displaced. Since then, the number displaced has surged much higher, according to the International Organization for Migration and the Benue State Emergency Management Agency, which collects data and provides relief to IDPs in the camps.

Now Amase and others in the camps are struggling to survive as COVID-19 spreads across the country. There is a danger of outbreaks occurring in the camps. Even if that doesn't happen, existing shortages of food rations and drugs have been worsened by lockdown restrictions imposed by the government to combat the pandemic.

Nigeria's first COVID-19 case was reported on February 27, when an Italian who flew in from Milan tested positive for the virus in Lagos. A week later, another case was reported when a Nigerian who had come in contact with the Italian tested positive. By June 22 there were 20,244 confirmed cases and 518 deaths, according to the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, which is responding to the pandemic alongside the ministry of health. With health systems overstretched and inaccessible to many, health experts are concerned that the situation could get worse.

In the IDP camps, the pandemic has made it harder for aid agencies to access the resources they need to provide relief. Helen Teghtegh, director of the Community Links and Human Empowerment Initiative, has been working in the camps since the conflict began in 2018. "The most important issue for these people now is food," she said, adding that while the government has distributed some food and other materials recently, there hasn't been enough to go around.

"Sometimes, we don't have anything to eat, and we go to bed like that—even with my children," said Amase. "When we have some money, we get cassava from the market and come back home to prepare it, and it becomes our meal for the days ahead."

The United Nations World Food Programme warns that by the end of 2020, COVID-19 could push the number of people suffering from acute hunger to more than a quarter of a billion—many of them in Africa. The World Bank predicts the pandemic will drive Africa into its first recession in 25 years and perhaps also spark a food security crisis on the continent because of declines in food imports, higher transaction costs, and reduced domestic demand.

Nongovernmental organizations and aid agencies working in the IDP camps have been providing some necessary supplies for people.

“They have been here asking us what we need and helping us where they can,” Amase said. “When my child was sick, they were the ones who took care of him.”

The Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders, UNICEF, and others have been in the camps for more than a year. Some have left, however, as the Boko Haram insurgency in northeast Nigeria has led to a growing humanitarian crisis there.

“We are carrying out sensitization for the people about what the pandemic is all about and how to stay safe from contracting the virus,” said Red Cross official Japheth Gwatse. “Emphasis was on hygiene and hand-wash demonstration, maintaining social distance, and wearing of face masks.”

At one of the camps, about 30 toilets serve more than 2,000 people. In front of the toilets, a sign reads, “Wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilets.” But there is another challenge: a lack of consistent access to clean water at the camps. To survive, people travel into the forest to find water. “They need water,” said Teghtegh, “so they won’t have to leave the camps again [and can] avoid getting infected with the virus.”

In April, two IDPs got sick, and camp officials suspected COVID-19. The government’s coronavirus task force was summoned, and the sick individuals were taken to an isolation center in the city and tested. The results came back negative. “They are well now and have joined their families in the camp,” said Teghtegh. “We will keep monitoring them and providing help where we can.”

One camp has a small health clinic. “What we treat here are mainly ailments like malaria, typhoid—because of the environment where they live,” said Stella Ngwan, one of the clinic’s three health-care workers. “When things become difficult, we send them to the state teaching hospital.”

“Life has never returned to normal ever since the attacks happened,” said Amase, recalling the traumatic event when herdsmen invaded her village. “My last child was not born [yet] when the conflict happened, so he won’t know what we went through at that time. It was an ugly experience.”

Before the attacks, Amase, 29, lived with her husband and children in a quiet, close-knit farming community in Guma, two hours' drive from the camp. Amase and her family cultivated groundnut, maize, and soya beans. The rainy season, from around March to August, was usually a busy time for them. After the planting season, they harvested their crops and sold them in a local market. Traders from neighboring states came to buy from them.

Amase said that getting out of their village "was a matter of life and death. And everyone wanted to escape from the chaos, the bloodshed, and the environment, because nowhere was safe—even with the security personnel moving around," she said. "Now we have lost everything to the herdsmen, including our farmland."

In Nigeria, open grazing is a controversial political issue. Cattle destroy crops, and many people have opposed open grazing on their lands, calling for the construction of ranches instead. For more than a decade, the Middle Belt has been a hotbed of violent conflicts between local farmers and herders who migrate from the north, where desertification and climate change have left less arable land for grazing. The farmers accuse the herders of invading their ancestral lands and destroying their farmland.

In 2017, the Benue State government passed an anti-grazing law, banning herders and their cattle from entering its territory for grazing and imposing a five-year jail term for offenders.

The herders are mostly Muslim, while the farmers are mostly Christian. In Nigeria, a large and diverse nation, Islam is dominant in the north and Christianity in the south. Benue, in the Middle Belt, is predominantly Christian, with a few clusters of Muslim communities. In 2018, two Catholic priests and 17 parishioners were killed in Benue during an early morning service, allegedly by herders. Other killings of Christians have sparked protests across the country.

According to the International Crisis Group, the herder-farmer conflicts in Nigeria have at times been even deadlier than the Boko Haram insurgency in the country's northeast. In 2016 alone, an estimated 2,500 people were killed and tens of thousands displaced.

There is an economic toll as well. A 2015 report by the global aid organization Mercy Corps says Nigeria could produce up to \$13.7 billion in additional annual revenue if the dispute between farmers and herders were to end.

Like Amase, Peter Kaver was almost killed when herdsmen invaded his village two years ago. He was at his farm working with his younger brother when he heard people screaming. He saw smoke billowing from a burning house nearby. Kaver and his brother quickly picked up their cutlasses and baskets and left the farm by another way.

“We luckily survived that day, because we later found out that they killed people in the burning house,” Kaver said. “We are still living in fear and hunger, and this coronavirus has made things more difficult for all of us.”

From 2009 to 2018, the number of IDPs in Africa grew from 6.4 million to 17.7 million, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. More than 2.5 million of them are in Nigeria. The humanitarian crisis there has been exacerbated by food insecurity and severe malnutrition, says the UNHCR. According to the agency, sub-Saharan Africa also hosts more than 26 percent of the world’s refugees—6.3 million in 2018, compared to 2.3 million in 2008. This is partly due to ongoing crises in Nigeria, the Central African Republic, and Sudan.

In recent years, the herder-farmer conflict has caused an acute humanitarian crisis. “It was a kill and occupy operation by the supposed herdsmen, which led to a lot of people being displaced,” said Moses Hwande, an IDP camp official. “That is where we are now.”

Even before the pandemic, there was malnutrition and hunger in the camps. In 2018, there were also reported cases of child marriages and human trafficking: because of hunger, women were marrying off their young daughters for as little as five dollars. Security has since been boosted to stop this practice.

Amase worships at a church built inside Agan Camp. Back in her village, she attended a local church. It was destroyed during the attacks by the herdsmen two years ago.

“We hope that God will take away our sufferings,” she said. “That is why we come to worship here and seek his face.”

It’s not clear when the villagers will be able to return to their ancestral homes. According to Teghtegh, this March saw an increase in IDPs moving into the camps as Benue continued to experience attacks from herdsmen—along with clashes between neighboring communities within the state.

“They keep on saying that they want to go back,” Teghtegh said. “If you interact with any of the displaced persons, the first thing they tell you is that they miss home and want to go back. But this cannot happen if there is no adequate security for them. Things are still not safe, and they are still being invaded back home. Some killings have been recorded in the last one month. . . . If they go back, are they truly safe?”

The threat of the pandemic continues as well. Amase hopes for a day when things return to normal so she and her family can return to their home.

“We are not only scared of the pandemic,” she said. “We are also scared of going back to our homes because of another attack. But we know God can help us.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Displaced and at risk.”