

# The Church and Challenges of Terrorism in GASSOL Local Government Area, Taraba State, Nigeria

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**Abstract**—*This study examines the Christian Response to Terrorism in Gassol Local Government Area, Taraba State, Nigeria, with a focus on kidnapping and banditry. The menace has become a serious problem, instilling fear and disrupting economic and agricultural activities. The research aims to discuss the social composition of the area, the incidence of kidnapping and banditry, factors influencing the Church's response, and the impact of this response. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected from primary sources (interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation) and secondary sources (printed and online materials). The data were analysed descriptively, historically, and practically. The study reveals that the Church's response is driven by the high rate of kidnapping and banditry, lack of peace, and the biblical mandate to care for the vulnerable. Government efforts to curb the menace are deemed inadequate, with insufficient attention to spiritual, psychological, and social rehabilitation of perpetrators. The absence of job opportunities, basic amenities, and improved living standards exacerbates the problem. The study recommends collaboration between the Church and authorities to combat kidnapping and banditry, invigorating security efforts, and advocating for respect for life and property. The Church should complement government initiatives in providing skills acquisition and youth empowerment. The study concludes that kidnapping and banditry are immoral acts devastating to human labour, respect for life, and peace. All stakeholders must work together to condemn and eradicate the menace, protecting lives and property.*

**Key-Words:** *Terrorism, Challenges, Kidnapping, Church, Gassol*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Gassol Local Government Area, Taraba State, North-eastern Nigeria, has faced ongoing security challenges associated with armed groups, terrorism, and militia activity. The area has witnessed targeted attacks on local communities, vigilante groups, civilians, and religious institutions. These incidents reflect broader patterns of insecurity across Taraba and neighbouring states, largely driven by violent clashes involving militant herders, banditry

networks, and the movement of displaced insurgent elements from Nigeria's north-western region (Punch Newspapers, 2022; Daily Trust, 2022). One of the most widely reported attacks on a Christian institution in Gassol Local Government Area, Taraba State, Nigeria occurred in January 2022, when a Catholic chapel at St John's College in Mutum-Biyu was destroyed by an explosive device allegedly planted by suspected terrorists. According to a report by (Daily Trust, 2022) the blast occurred shortly after a youth programme had concluded, causing extensive structural damage to the church building. Fortunately, no fatalities were recorded. Witnesses recounted hearing gunshots shortly after the explosion as the assailants fled the area, heightening fear and tension among residents. Coverage by Punch Newspapers (2022) further noted that authorities linked the incident to suspected terrorists or kidnappers who may have used the explosion as a diversion to facilitate their escape. The Taraba State Police Command suggested that the attack reflected the increasingly blurred lines between terrorism and organised criminal activity in the region, underscoring the complex security challenges facing communities in Taraba State.

Taraba State has also experienced repeated lethal attacks attributed to terrorist groups and armed herders, incidents that have both directly and indirectly affected church communities. In one notable episode of violence, militants reportedly killed members of local vigilante groups in Gassol Local Government Area, Taraba State, Nigeria, underscoring the extent to which armed actors have eroded grassroots security structures and weakened public confidence in community-based protection mechanisms (Punch Newspapers, 2022). Broader regional human rights assessments further document hundreds of Christian fatalities across Taraba linked to jihadist and herder-related violence, identifying Gassol among the impacted areas (Human Rights Without Frontiers, 2021). Together, these reports illustrate a pattern of persistent insecurity that

continues to strain intercommunal relations and heighten vulnerability among religious communities. The physical security of churches and their congregations continues to pose a serious challenge. Repeated destruction of church buildings and the unpredictable nature of attacks have disrupted worship services, religious gatherings, and church-led community programmes. As threats of violence persist, many worshippers are increasingly reluctant to attend public worship, leading to heightened fear and significant interruptions to normal religious life.

In addition, ongoing displacement has weakened congregational stability. Across Taraba, numerous residents have fled their homes in response to violent incursions by armed groups and militants. As a result, church communities have become fragmented, struggling to sustain regular services, outreach initiatives, and the social support systems that once held them together. Church leaders and civil society actors have voiced growing concern over what they describe as an inadequate government response, urging authorities to adopt more proactive and preventive security strategies to safeguard vulnerable communities. Their criticisms point to deeper governance and security shortcomings in confronting terrorism-related threats that continue to undermine religious harmony in Taraba State, Nigeria.

Beyond terrorism-linked violence, Gassol Local Government Area, Taraba State, Nigeria also grappled with intercommunal tensions. Reports have highlighted clashes involving youths from different religious and ethnic backgrounds—incidents that, while not classified as terrorism, underscore the fragility of interfaith coexistence in parts of the LGA (Information Nigeria, 2017). Together, these dynamics intensify the pressures on churches as they navigate both terror-related insecurity and complex local interreligious relationships.

Efforts to reduce conflict have increasingly focused on negotiated peace agreements and structured dialogue between hostile communities. For instance, in 2025, leaders of the Tiv and Fulani communities in Gassol signed a peace accord aimed at ending years of violent clashes and fostering coexistence (Taraba Express, 2025). Although this initiative was not specifically designed to address church security, community-based conflict resolution mechanisms such as this create a foundation for broader stability. By promoting trust, communication, and locally

driven accountability, these agreements can indirectly enhance the safety and resilience of religious institutions operating within affected areas

#### SOCIAL COMPOSITION OF GASSOL LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, TARABA STATE, NIGERIA

Gassol, located in Taraba State, is a Local Government Area with its administrative headquarters in Mutum-Biyu. The town serves as a hub for both commercial and agricultural activities, giving it a semi-cosmopolitan character. Spanning an area of 5,548 km<sup>2</sup>, Gassol had a population of 244,749 according to the 2006 census conducted by the National Population Commission. Its strategic location and economic activities make it an important centre in the region. The postal code for the area is 672, as recorded by the Post Office in 2009.

Gassol shares its boundaries with the Local Government Areas of Ardo-Kola, Jalingo, and Lau. It is divided into two prominent chiefdoms: the Gassol Chiefdom, which comprises the districts of Gassol, Jiddawo, Sansani, Wurojam, and Wuryo; and the Mutum-Biyu Chiefdom, which includes Gunduma, Mutum-Biyu, Namnai, Shagarda, Shira, and Tutare. The northern boundary of Gassol is defined by the Benue River, while the Taraba River flows through the area, eventually joining the Benue.

Gassol is notable for its pluralistic society, embracing a rich diversity of religions, ethnicities, cultures, norms, and values. The area reflects a convergence of communities that were once largely isolated, historically described as homogeneous societies. Today, the social fabric of Gassol LGA is distinguished by its rich ethnic diversity, with a wide array of groups and communities coexisting across the region.

#### ETHNIC GROUPS

Gassol is one of the sixteen Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Taraba State. Its population is predominantly made up of the Fulani, Wurkun, Jukun, and Tiv, with other groups including the Mumuye, Jenjo, and Yandang. Known as the agricultural hub of the state, Gassol boasts diverse farming and livestock activities. The Fulani are renowned for rearing large herds of cattle, while the Tiv and Jukun cultivate extensive yam farms, making

Dan-Anacha home to the largest yam market in Taraba State.

## RELIGIONS

In the Gassol Local Government Area, three major religions are widely practised: Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion. Accurately determining the Muslim and Christian populations in this region is challenging due to the lack of recent statistics, complex ethnic and religious dynamics, and limited research on religious demographics. Estimates suggest that the Muslim population may range from 60% to 70% (approximately 168,000 to 196,000 individuals), primarily consisting of Fulani, Hausa, and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups. In contrast, the Christian population is estimated at 30% to 40% (around 84,000 to 112,000 individuals), with major denominations including the Catholic Church and the United Methodist Church in Nigeria (UMCN), alongside other churches such as the Anglican Church, the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria (LCCN), the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (CRCN), the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA), and various Pentecostal churches.

## RATE OF KIDNAPPING IN GASSOL LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, TARABA STATE, NIGERIA

The incidence of kidnapping and banditry in the Gassol Local Government Area of Taraba State, Nigeria, has reached alarming levels. As noted by Jalo Ibrahim (Personal communication, August 12, 2024), the region has experienced a series of attacks and abductions perpetrated by bandits, instilling a pervasive sense of fear among the local population. This climate of insecurity has severely disrupted various economic activities, particularly agriculture, as residents are increasingly reluctant to venture into their farmlands for cultivation.

A particularly shocking incident occurred when unknown gunmen invaded the residence of the Deputy Governor of Taraba State, Engr. Haruna Manu, and abducted his mother in Mutum-Biu, the administrative centre of Gassol LGA. This event was reported by John Mkom in the Vanguard newspaper on February 9, 2016, highlighting that the deputy governor was out of the state at the time of the abduction.

## FACTORS THAT MADE THE CHURCH RESPOND TO KIDNAPPING IN GASSOL LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, TARABA STATE

Kidnapping is a serious issue that no organisation will ignore, and both governmental and non-governmental organisations have tried to respond to curtail the menace. According to James Galadima (Personal Communication, 22nd August, 2024), "The Church also responded to kidnapping in Gassol local government area for many reasons that are grounded in Christian teachings and Values."

The following are factors that led the Church to respond to kidnapping in Gassol Local Government:

1. The rate of kidnapping: The continued incidences of kidnapping experienced in Gassol Local Government Area, Taraba State, Nigeria have triggered the Church to respond to kidnapping.
2. Biblical mandate to care for the vulnerable: Christians have a mandate to care for the needs of the less privileged.
3. Absence of peace in the society: According to Emmanuel S Gana (Personal Communication, 1st September 2024), people are not living in peace as a result of fear of kidnapers and bandits.
4. Protection of human life and dignity: Human life and dignity are in danger as a result of kidnapping activities in Gassol Local Government.
5. Opposition to injustice and evil: Kidnapping is being seen as evil to mankind because of its nature.
6. Responsibility to uphold moral and ethical standards: James G Habila (Personal Communication, 22nd August, 2024) posits that the Church has the responsibility to uphold what is right and acceptable.

## Measures Taken by the Church in Gassol Local Government Area, Taraba State, Nigeria, to Address kidnapping / banditry

The church has taken the following measures to address the menaces of kidnapping and banditry:

### Spiritual Responses

The Church has organised prayer vigils and intercessions, as stated by Navoba Solomon (Personal Communication, 3rd August 2024), to seek divine help for the safe return of victims and comfort for their loved ones. Special masses or services are also held to offer prayers for the victim and their

family, seeking solace and guidance from God (Markus, Personal Communication, 27th August 2024). Additionally, fasting and spiritual reflection are practised to help individuals connect with their faith and find peace amidst the turmoil (Dean Rev James, Personal Communication, 22nd August 2024).

#### Emotional and Psychological Support

The Church offers counselling services to victims' families to help them navigate complex emotions and challenges (Abraham Dadiya, Personal Communication, 7th August 2024). Trauma care and therapy are also provided to both the victim and their loved ones to help them process their experiences and heal from psychological wounds (Benjamin Suleiman, Personal Communication, 15th September 2024). Emotional support groups are another means of providing a sense of community and understanding for those affected.

#### Practical Assistance

The Church provides financial aid for ransom payment, as many victims and their families are unable to meet exorbitant demands on their own (Kenah Nefas, Personal Communication, 18th August 2024). Food, shelter, and basic needs are also offered to victims, who require necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing (Geoffrey O., Personal Communication, 17th August 2024). Medical assistance is another crucial form of practical assistance, helping victims recover from physical or psychological trauma (Abenika Francis, Personal Communication, August 3, 2024).

#### Advocacy and Awareness

The Church has issued public statements condemning kidnapping, expressing solidarity with victims and their families (Navoba Solomon, Personal Communication, 3rd August 2024). Awareness campaigns have been conducted to educate the public about the prevalence of kidnapping and its devastating impact on individuals and communities. These campaigns include workshops, seminars, and outreach programs aimed at raising awareness about the signs of kidnapping, prevention strategies, and response protocols.

The Church has collaborated with authorities to support kidnapped victims and their families, providing emotional and spiritual support, assisting with negotiations for ransom, and facilitating the safe return of victims (Markus, Personal Communication, 27th August 2024). The Church has also worked with law enforcement agencies to develop strategies for preventing and combating kidnapping in the region.

#### Impact of the Church

The Church's interventions have contributed to a reduction in kidnapping incidents in Gassol Local Government Area (Patience G., Personal Communication, 24th September 2024). The Church has provided emotional, practical, and spiritual support to victims and their families, mitigating the effects of kidnapping. Community empowerment programs have promoted community vigilance, reducing kidnapping vulnerabilities.

## II. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The study recommends that the Church take a proactive role in addressing kidnapping and banditry by promoting principles of integrity, respect, and self-worth. The Church should establish neighborhood watch groups to complement security efforts and advocate for policies and laws aimed at reducing poverty and promoting job creation.
2. The Church should also urge the government to equip security personnel with necessary resources and involve local security personnel familiar with the terrain in combating kidnapping. The Church should promote rural development to address rural-urban migration among youths.

## III. CONCLUSION

The research findings confirm that kidnapping is a significant concern in Gassol Local Government Area, Taraba State, Nigeria. The Church has played a vital role in addressing this issue through advocacy, awareness, and support for victims. The Church's interventions have been multifaceted, encompassing spiritual, emotional, and practical support for victims and their families.

The study highlights the importance of collective responsibility, community engagement, and socio-economic development in combating kidnapping and

promoting community safety. The Church's collaboration with authorities and community empowerment programs have contributed to the reduction of kidnapping vulnerabilities. Addressing socio-economic factors such as poverty and unemployment is crucial in preventing kidnapping.

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