

Muslims in Nigeria Club Christian

Teacher to Death

Obed Minchakpu

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Students, extremists stone, beat and burn her after 'desecration' of yet unfound Quran.

GOMBE, Nigeria - Christianah Oluwatoyin Oluwasesin, a teacher at Government Secondary School of Gandu in this northern Nigerian town, was in high spirits last Wednesday (March 21) as she made her way to school where she teaches government. She was happy that after the final day of exams, she would be joining her husband in their hometown of Abeokuta, in the southwestern state of Ogun; a few months earlier, her husband Femi Oluwasesin had gone to Abeokuta to take a hospital position as a laboratory technician. The high school teacher's joyous mood had been noted not only that day but the previous one, as she was seen taking pictures and exchanging pleasantries with friends and colleagues.

Soon her happiness would be cut short. Muslim students at the school, along with outside Islamic extremists, murdered Oluwasesin on March 21 over claims that she desecrated the Quran. They beat, stoned, and clubbed her to death, then burned her corpse. As a supervisor of a class writing a final examination on Islamic Religious knowledge on that day, Oluwasesin was responsible for ensuring that students strictly kept rules and to prevent mischief in the hall, which had become common among cheating students, said Alike Musa Yila, a fellow teacher at the school.

Musa told Compass that Oluwasesin had collected papers, books and bags before the exam in the all-girls class, in accordance with school procedures to prevent cheating, and dropped the materials in front of the class. While noting that Oluwasesin was not aware the belongings included a Quran, a local newspaper reported she tossed the belongings outside the classroom.

But Musa, who rushed into the classroom soon after students began yelling, told Compass that Oluwasesin had dropped the belongings in front of the class. "Usually such items are returned to every student as each returns her answer script," Musa said. "Soon after the bags collected by Oluwasesin were dropped in front of the class, one of the girls in the class began to cry. She told her colleagues that she had a copy of the Quran in her bag, that Oluwasesin touched the bag, and that by doing so she had desecrated the

Quran, since she was a Christian."

Soon after the student raised this alarm, other students in class began to shout "Allahu Akbar [God is great]." "It was at this point that I was attracted to the riotous scene in that class, and I then rushed there," said Musa, who said he witnessed the murder of Oluwasesin by the Muslim students and extremists.

"How could a teacher know that there was a copy of the Quran in a student's bag if this was not pointed out to her?" He notified Malam Baba Musa, patron of the Muslim Students' Society at the school. The MSS patron, along with three other school staff members, went to the classroom to try to bring calm, Alike Musa said. In the raucous confusion, he managed to rush Oluwasesin out of class to the principal's office.

"The principal left me and Oluwasesin in his office and also went there to calm down the Muslim students," he said. "Knowing that the students may soon come to this office, I pushed Oluwasesin into the bathroom in this office and then locked up the office." By the time he had rejoined the principal and other staff members, he said, the entire school was engulfed in uproar.

Muslim extremists from outside the school rushed in to join in the unrest. "They destroyed school property and were demanding that Oluwasesin must be given to them to be stoned to death," Musa said. "When we could not give in by releasing Oluwasesin to them, they started stoning us."

Pandemonium prevented school or law enforcement officials from getting Oluwasesin out of the school, he said. "While we were thinking of ways to take Oluwasesin out of the school, the Muslims broke into the principal's office and dragged her out," he said.

"The principal rushed there to save her as they clubbed her with an iron on the head and blood was gushing out from the wounded side of the head. He was pleading that they should not kill her, but they were insisting that she must be killed."

Musa said that the Muslims overcame efforts by the principal and another teacher identified only as Kabiru to protect Oluwasesin. "The principal succeeded in getting Oluwasesin up to the school gate," he said. "There was a house near the gate, and he dragged her into the house, but the rioting Muslims went into the house and dragged her out again. This time, they clubbed her to death, brought old mats and placed dirt on her corpse, and then burned the body."

Quran Unfound

Musa said he was baffled that throughout the unrest, the copy of the Quran supposed to have been desecrated was never seen, nor was it produced by the offended student. "Whether the Quran was in the bag of that student, nobody knows," he said.

Attempts by at least four policemen to quell the unrest had failed as they had been forced to retreat, Musa told Compass. "The Muslims smashed the car of Oluwasesin, which was parked in the car park attached to the building housing the library, office and some classrooms," he said. "Her car was set on fire, and soon the entire building went up in flames."

Along with Oluwasesin's car, the school library, and other offices near the parking lot were all burned, he said. When the Fire Brigade arrived, he said, Muslims prevented firemen from coming into the school by striking them with stones.

Having killed Oluwasesin, the extremists turned their attention on Musa, who said he had been advised to leave and had done so in time. The extremists set his motorbike on fire, he said, when they realized he had eluded them.

The Government Secondary School of Gandu has a student population of about 4,000, about 10 percent of whom are Christian, Musa said. The school has been closed down since the incident. Principal Mallam Mohammed Saddique, who was injured in the melee, could not be reached for comment, but Vice-Principal Hajiya Hadiza Ali Gombe told Compass that the situation had been brought under control.

"There is no more problem," she said, declining to speak further on the issue. All secondary schools in the Gombe metropolitan area have been shut down indefinitely to avert a spread of the crisis, according to news reports.

Authorities have arrested at least 12 students involved in the killing, according to Voice of America. A five-member committee appointed by the state to investigate the incident is due to present findings in two weeks.

In February 2006 in the neighboring state of Bauchi, at least 20 Christians were killed and two churches were burned down by Muslims furious that a Christian high school teacher had tried to confiscate a Quran from a student who was reading it during class. (See Compass Direct News, "Teacher Accused of Blasphemy in Nigeria Disappears," March 28, 2006).

Church in Mourning

Asked whether there had been any past misunderstandings between

Oluwasesin and her Muslim colleagues or students, Musa said there had been no underlying motives for killing her. "She has never had any problem with any Muslim, whether a teacher or a student, in the three years she was in this school," he said.

The killing of Oluwasesin shocked the Christian community in Gombe and has left her church devastated. At Evangel Chapel's morning worship service on Sunday (March 25), Elder Robert Simon said during a sermon that such trials "are the real tests for our Christian faith, and our desire to follow Jesus lies in such difficult times."

With the church's regular preaching pastor traveling with the Oluwasesin family to her hometown of Abeokuta for burial, Simon said he understood how congregants were feeling. "There are times you even don't find God meaningful to you - you even ask questions like, 'Where was God when this happened?'" he said. "God cannot be found anywhere else, because he is always there for us. It is Satan who makes God not to be meaningful to us, so that we go looking elsewhere for alternatives to God."

Simon said Oluwasesin was working to "undo the kingdom of darkness," as she was fighting corruption in the educational system. "That is why we suffer persecution," he said. "If Satan knows that you have been planted to undo his work, he will kill you. Oluwasesin did not live her life for the world but as an agent of the kingdom, working for righteousness. That is the reason she was killed."

Andrew Osakue, also an elder at Evangel Chapel, told Compass, "she was like a flash in the pot. She came to this church barely four years ago. She was a touching example as to how a Christian should be." Oluwasesin was a Sunday school teacher and a member of her church's prayer team. She and her husband had gone to Gombe on a one-year mandatory National Youth Service Scheme of the Nigerian government. After the service year, in which both of them excelled, they were employed by the Gombe state government, she as a teacher and he as a laboratory technician at a hospital in town.

Oluwasesin was the mother of two children.

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