

Boko Haram guns down nearly 150 people praying in mosques in Nigeria

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Maidugiri (Nigeria) : Boko Haram extremists gunned down nearly 150 Muslims praying in mosques in a northeast Nigerian town during the holy month of Ramadan, a government official and a self-defense fighter said Thursday.

The attack Wednesday night on the town of Kukawa came the day after the Islamic extremist group attacked a village 35 kilometers (22 miles) away and killed another 48 men and boys, according to witnesses who counted the dead.

The people of Kukawa were in several mosques, praying ahead of breaking their daylong fast, when the extremists attacked. They killed 97 people, mainly men, said self-defense spokesman Abbas Gava and a senior government official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he is not authorized to give information to reporters.

Gava said his group's fighters in Kukawa said some militants also broke into people's homes, killing women and children as they prepared the evening meal.

Kukawa is 180 kilometers (110 miles) northeast of Maiduguri, the biggest city in northeast Nigeria and the birthplace of Boko Haram.

Nigeria's homegrown extremist group often defiles mosques where it believes clerics espouse too moderate a form of Islam. Wednesday's attack follows a directive from the Islamic State group for fighters to increase attacks during Ramadan. Boko Haram this year became the IS group's West African franchise.

On Tuesday night, the extremists invaded the village of Mussaram, ordered men and women to separate and then opened fire on the men and boys, witnesses said.

"A total of 48 males died on the spot while 17 others escaped with serious injuries," said Maidugu Bida, a self-defense official based in nearby Monguno who helped bury the dead.

On Monday, two suicide bombers blew themselves up prematurely in a village outside Maiduguri just an hour before the arrival of Nigeria's Vice President Yemi Osinbajo. He visited some of the hundreds of thousands of people displaced by the 5-year-old Islamic uprising that has killed more than 13,000 people and driven 1.5 million from their homes.

Some of those killed in attacks in the past month had only just returned to rebuild towns and villages recaptured this year from Boko Haram by a multinational army.

- AP