

Jihadi violence hits Benin, shows spread across West Africa

From Associated [Press via ABC News](#)

COTONOU, Benin – It's been more than a year since jihadis first stormed Igor Kassah's town in northern Benin but the priest still lives in fear. His once peaceful life is now marked by threatening phone calls and Islamic extremist diatribes tacked on church doors demanding that people leave. He is haunted by the bodies he has seen of those killed in the attacks. "We no longer have a normal life," the 41-year-old said through text messages to The Associated Press. "It's hard to talk and act confidently because you don't know who's in front of you anymore."

Violence by extremists linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group has wracked much of West Africa's inland Sahel region for more than seven years. Now it is spreading into the coastal states with Benin the hardest hit, say experts.

Jihadi attacks in Benin have spiked more than tenfold between July and December



A police officer and a soldier from Benin stop a motorcyclist at a checkpoint outside Porga, Benin, March 26, 2022. Porga, in the Atakora region of northern Benin bordering Burkina Faso, has suffered several jihadist attacks. Violence linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group, which has wracked much of West Africa's Sahel region for more than seven years is spreading into the coastal states and Benin has become the hardest hit. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, attacks have spiked more than tenfold. (AP Photo/ Marco Simoncelli)

The Associated Press

The violence in Benin, a country of 12 million people, is largely a result of what's happening in neighboring Burkina Faso, where jihadi attacks have killed hundreds and displaced nearly 2 million people. Attacks were initially confined to the border between eastern Burkina Faso and Benin in the W and Pendjari National Parks in the Alibori and Atacora regions, but are now expanding. Incidents have increased since June in populated areas around the parks with jihadis connected to the al-Qaida-linked group known as JNIM, pushing Benin's military from the border creating a security vacuum and taking control of part of the country, said a recent report by Clingendael.

The jihadi rebels appear to be creating a large area of influence from Niger to Togo in order to keep supply lines open, recruit people and procure material, say analysts. Another aim could be to withstand pressure from the Accra Initiative, a military platform involving Burkina Faso and coastal countries to prevent the further spread of extremism from the Sahel.

...communities in Benin say they are being forced to accept a life they never thought they'd have to endure.

"We thought for a moment, perhaps because of a certain naivety ... that (we) could escape the situation of threats, of near-daily attacks that (Benin) is undergoing," said Arnaud Houenou an expert in national security and a professor at Benin's University of Abomey Calavi. "Benin has been spared the terrorist war in the Sahel despite its proximity to Nigeria and Burkina Faso," he said. "But reality has set in."