

Analysis: Poverty, Graft Behind Nigeria Violence

By Michelle Faul

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa, July 28 (AP) – Islamist militant attacks that killed scores in Nigeria this week appear to be abating, but Nigeria's woes show no sign of going away — and in fact are growing deeper.

A country that should be rich on prodigious oil reserves is getting poorer by the day, Islamic radicals are seeking to impose a Taliban-style regime in the north, and Angola has surpassed Nigeria as Africa's biggest oil producer.

The two-day outburst of violence is just the latest wave in a familiar cycle of bloodshed — and a sign that the corrupt government is unable or unwilling to confront the myriad problems that keep Africa's most populous nation mired in unfulfilled promise.

At the heart of the radical Islamic insurgency that sparked this week's violence is dire poverty

and political maneuvering — not religion.

The attacks on police that have killed more than 80 people have been committed by frustrated, unemployed youths and orchestrated by religious leaders and politicians who manipulate them to retain power.

"The outburst of violence is an explosion of pent up grievances, especially as hunger and unemployment create fertile grounds for unrest," political commentator Salisu Suleiman wrote in the new Nigerian newspaper NEXT.

It's a similar situation to Nigeria's oil-rich delta, where attacks by militants demanding a greater share of the wealth their region produces have reduced oil output by a third — and led the way for Nigeria to lose its historic place as Africa's leading oil producer to Angola.

The militants have carried out a string of devastating attacks on pipelines and other oil installations as well as kidnappings of petroleum company employees.

When the oil militants attacked a fuel depot in Lagos, the economic capital — for the first time striking outside the delta — the government reacted by freeing a long-jailed leader of the movement and urging negotiations.

But that fight likely will continue as long as the government fails to address decades-long grievances about the unrelenting poverty of the delta people.

In the north, governments have done little over the years beyond commissioning reports after particularly bloody bouts of violence, never acting on them because those orchestrating the violence have links to well-placed members of the elite that has controlled successive governments.

The foot soldiers are ill-educated manual workers who are easy to manipulate: one of the names of the radical sect behind the latest violence is "Boko Haram," which means "Western education is sin."

It's one of the legacies of British colonization that never has been rectified. The colonizers ruled the north of Nigeria indirectly through sultans and caliphs. In the south, they governed directly and missionaries brought Western education. The gulf remains to this day.

Corruption and inefficiency are blamed for the persisting poverty in Nigeria, the world's eighth-biggest oil exporter and fifth-largest source of U.S. oil imports.

Some Nigerians were hopeful 10 years ago when decades of corrupt and brutal military rule ended, and again two years ago when they had the first handover of power from one civilian president to another.

But both former President Olusegun Obasanjo and current President Umaru Yar'Adua have links to the powerful military — and that has helped perpetuate Nigeria's cycle of corruption.

More than halfway through his term, Nigerians have lost hope in Yar'Adua's promises of reform, including a chaotic and corrupt electoral system that even Yar'Adua admitted left questions about whether he really won elections.

Like previous Nigerian governments, he has failed to deliver even basic services like piped water, electricity and health care.

His pledge to fight corruption remains unfulfilled, with state governors charged with stealing millions of dollars still on the loose.

Many are asking whether he, like his predecessors, is a prisoner of corrupt vested interests that helped propel him to power.

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***Michelle Faul has covered African affairs for 25 years. (END/2009)