



A protester holds up a Burkina Faso flag in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, in 2014. At least 15 people were killed in an attack by gunmen on Catholics gathered for Sunday Mass in a Burkina Faso village Feb. 25, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Joe Penney)

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At least 15 Catholic worshippers were killed in a Burkina Faso village on Sunday, Feb. 25, when gunmen attacked a community as they gathered for prayers in the country's conflict-hit northern region, church officials said.

The violence in the village of Essakane was a "terrorist attack" that left 12 of the Catholic faithful dead at the scene, while three others died later as they were being treated for their wounds, according to a statement issued by Abbot Jean-Pierre Sawadogo, vicar general of the Dori Diocese, where the attack happened.

No further details were provided about the attack, which no group claimed responsibility for. But suspicion fell on jihadis who have frequently attacked remote communities and security forces, especially in the northern region.

"In this painful circumstance, we invite you to pray for the rest in God for those who have died in faith, for the healing of the wounded and ... for the conversion of those who continue to sow death and desolation in our country," Sawadogo said in a statement.

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About half of Burkina Faso is outside government control as jihadi groups have ravaged the country for years. Fighters have killed thousands and displaced more than 2 million people, further threatening the stability of the country, which had two coups in 2022.

The country's junta has struggled to restore peace in violence hot spots since the first coup in January 2022. The number of people killed by jihadis has nearly tripled compared with the 18 previous months, according to a report by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies in August.

In addition to the junta's limited capacity, the security situation also has been worsened by the country's porous borders with Mali and Niger, both of which are also run by juntas and which also struggle with security crises.