

## Nigeria journalists get bail in polio attacks case (Update)

February 12 2013

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Two Nigerian journalists and a cleric were granted bail on Thursday after being charged over a controversial radio programme on polio vaccines days before deadly attacks on polio clinics.

Gunmen attacked two polio clinics in the northern city of Kano on February 8, killing at least 10 people, after Wazobia FM broadcast a story on claims of forced vaccinations.

One of the Wazobia journalists said he was beaten and his equipment seized during an altercation at the cleric's home when health officials were seeking to force the cleric to have his children immunised.

The programme also allegedly revived conspiracy theories surrounding polio campaigns, with previous claims having been made of the vaccines being part of a Western plot to harm Muslims.

Two journalists from Wazobia and controversial cleric Abubakar Rabo were all charged on Tuesday and initially denied bail.

Magistrate Ibrahim Bello granted them bail on Thursday of 100,000 naira each (\$635, 475 euros), while each suspect must provide two guarantors.

"In Nigerian law, any offence that attracts a sentence not exceeding three years isailable," Bello said.

"The maximum sentence for the charges against the accused upon conviction is three years, and for that the court hereby grants them bail."

Charges include criminal conspiracy, inciting disturbance, intentional insult, obstruction of a public servant in discharge of his public functions, defamation and uttering injurious falsehoods.

Claims that polio vaccinations are used to render Muslims infertile have long spread in Nigeria's mainly Muslim north, often stoked by local politicians and clerics, dealing setbacks to efforts to eradicate the crippling disease.

Such conspiracy theories led to the suspension of vaccination campaigns in Kano in 2003.

Nigeria is one of only three countries still considered to have endemic polio, along with Pakistan and Afghanistan.

It is not yet clear who was responsible for the February 8 attacks at the clinics and there was no evidence linking Wazobia's piece to the violence.

Islamist extremist group Boko Haram has carried out attacks in Kano, though gangs linked to local politics also operate.

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists issued a statement Wednesday calling on Nigerian authorities to drop the criminal charges against the journalists.

"We are deeply troubled by the very serious criminal charges lodged against Wazobia FM journalists over a radio programme that raised critical questions about the Kano state government's handling of a polio vaccination campaign," said CPJ Africa Advocacy Coordinator

Mohamed Keita.

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