



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Conflict and Killings in Nigeria's Middle Belt

Thursday, December 17, 2020

1:00 – 4:00 p.m.

2172 Rayburn House Office Building and Virtual via Cisco WebEx

As prepared for delivery

Good afternoon. I join my colleague and co-chair Chris Smith in welcoming the witnesses and the public to this Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on the deteriorating human rights situation in Nigeria, with a focus on the Middle Belt.

I understand other members of the Commission may be joining us or may submit written statements for the record. I appreciate their participation and look forward to what they will have to say.

Ambassador Brownback, it is good to see you again. I'll take this opportunity to thank you for your work as Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. I know you have spoken out on behalf of members of many faiths, including Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists in China and Rohingya Muslims in Burma.

As a practicing Catholic, I benefit greatly from the freedom of religion we have historically enjoyed in the United States.

I am also deeply aware that unless and until freedom of belief is guaranteed for everyone on an equal basis, whatever their faith tradition, it is not truly guaranteed for anyone. So I appreciate your work.

Nigeria is important. It is Africa's most populous country and its largest economy, an influential regional political actor, and a top trading partner, recipient of foreign investment and

beneficiary of U.S. foreign assistance. Nigerians make up the largest African-born population in the United States.

Nigeria is also a country facing very serious and longstanding human rights challenges with characteristics and dynamics that vary by region.

In the northeast, conflict between the military and two U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations – Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province, ISWAP – has killed tens of thousands over the past decade, displaced millions, and caused a protracted humanitarian crisis.

Most Members of Congress are familiar with Boko Haram's abduction of 276 girls from Chibok in 2014, and ISWAP's abduction of 110 girls from Dapchi in 2018. Although Muslim communities in northeast Nigeria have borne the brunt of the violence by these two groups, the victims of the Chibok and Dapchi abductions were Christians.

In Nigeria's northwest, conflict between pastoralists and farmers has escalated as part of a broader deterioration in security conditions involving cattle rustling, kidnapping, ethnic massacres, and emergent Islamist extremist activity.

Just last week more than 500 schoolboys, apparently mostly Muslim, were abducted from a boarding school in Katsina state in the Northwest. A day later Boko Haram, whose name means "Western education is forbidden," issued a video claiming responsibility for the abduction. According to news reports, 333 boys are still missing.

Farmer-herder violence also has surged in the central Middle Belt, an ethnically and religiously diverse region, where disputes over access to resources coincide with cleavages between Christian and Muslim communities. This region is the focus of the hearing today.

I want to be clear that the violence unfolding throughout Nigeria is a tragedy.

No violent death is acceptable.

No one should have to live in fear of being attacked by illegal armed groups – or by a country's police or security forces, for that matter.

It is deeply unfortunate that the Nigerian state is failing to provide protection for its civilian population or to ensure accountability for the victims of violence. We know from experience that these failures can feed an escalation of violence.

The question for us is what we can do about it.

This Commission approaches human rights violations from two angles: how to respond when they occur, and how to prevent them in the first place. Especially when it comes to situations with a risk of atrocities like mass killings, prevention must be a priority.

The Simon Skjodt Center at the U.S. Memorial Holocaust Museum recently issued its annual Statistical Risk Assessment for mass killings. The Center calculates that Nigeria faces a 7.3% risk of a new mass killing of at least 1,000 people over the next year. That's a 1 in 14 chance, an increase from past years.

So prevention has to be the name of the game here.

Now we've looked at the situation in the Middle Belt before – the last hearing was in 2018. We've talked with many experts on Nigeria and on human rights and reviewed a lot of solid research.

We've found widespread consensus that the underlying drivers of conflict in the Middle Belt are complex and multidimensional: competition for political and economic power, disputes over access to land and other resources exacerbated by the impacts of climate change, and impunity for past violence that gives rise to reprisal killings.

So I hope our witnesses today will provide recommendations as to what more the U.S. government can and should be doing to address these underlying drivers.

For my part, let me say that I look forward to working with Co-Chair Smith next congress – assuming we are both re-appointed -- on a hearing that examines the links between climate change, environmental degradation, and the prevention of atrocities.

One last thought: we know that the language we use to describe conflicts is very important. As we examine the on-the-ground reality in Nigeria and other conflict-ridden societies, we must not allow ourselves to contribute to polarization by reducing whole populations to the “other.”

I close by asking unanimous consent to include in the record of this hearing the following materials:

- A statement for the record from Amnesty International USA.
- A statement for the record from Ms. Fatima Madaki, Project Manager for Advancing Religious Tolerance, Search for Common Ground.
- A statement for the record from Rev. Fr. Anthony I. Bature, Head of Department, Religious Studies; Chaplain at St. Francis of Assisi Chaplaincy, Federal University of Technology, Wukari, Taraba State; Executive Director of the Foundation for Peace,

Hope, and Conflict Management (FPHCM); and member of the Forum on Farmer and Herder Relations in Nigeria.

- 2020 USCIRF Nigeria Country Update.

Thank you.