

TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

**HEARING
ON
CLIMATE CHANGE AND HUMAN RIGHTS
JULY 28, 2022, 2:30 P.M. EDT
Virtual via Zoom**

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Thank you Chairman Smith and Chairman McGovern. It is an honor and a pleasure to have been invited to address you this afternoon concerning the important topic of climate change and human rights. I applaud the Commission and its staff for focusing our attention on the impact of climate change on the people whom the hearing notice describes as “vulnerable populations, driver[s] of armed conflict, immigration and displacement, as both a risk and an opportunity for indigenous populations, and ... threats and attacks against environmental defenders[s],” and others.

My testimony this afternoon will focus on the ground-level impact of climate change – and of climate change politics – not only on those on whom this hearing is focused, but also on the interests of the United States itself.

Please allow me to begin with what, I assume, will be an unassailable statement: The climate is changing. As I understand today’s agenda, the issue is “*What do we do about it?*” I also think it fair to assume that there will be no disagreement when I say that the time to be doing “something about climate change” was, and remains, “years ago, now, and into the future.”

So, the questions on the table today are as follows:

1. *What human rights interests are adversely affected by climate change?*; and

2. *What strategies will advance our efforts to mitigate or avoid those adverse effects on the actual people whom we have identified as the special foci of our hearing today?*

Lest this discussion take place at too high a level of generality, my focus today is on Nigeria, or, more appropriately, on *Nigerians*. Nigeria is, for better or worse, a “textbook case” of what is wrong with the debate over climate change and human right, and *Nigerians* – that is, the people we are supposed to be helping – become the victims of our inaction.

As the remainder of my written remarks highlights, even a focus on Nigeria occurs at too high altitude to provide much by way of insight. In order to get a sense of the shape, scope, and origins of the practical problems facing each of the communities who actually *live* the impact of climate change in their families and communities, we must get closer to ground-level.

I will therefore focus briefly on Benue State, which is located in the hotly-contested “Middle Belt.” One cannot discuss the Middle Belt with diplomats from the European Union or the United States without giving a mandatory by to the *concept* of climate change. I am happy to do so here.

The fact remains, however, that the climate narrative drove (and continues to drive) *every* discussion in which I participated during my time as Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy Human Rights, and Labor, and it continues to frustrate efforts on the ground to get control of the very real problems affecting Nigerians and the communities in which they live.

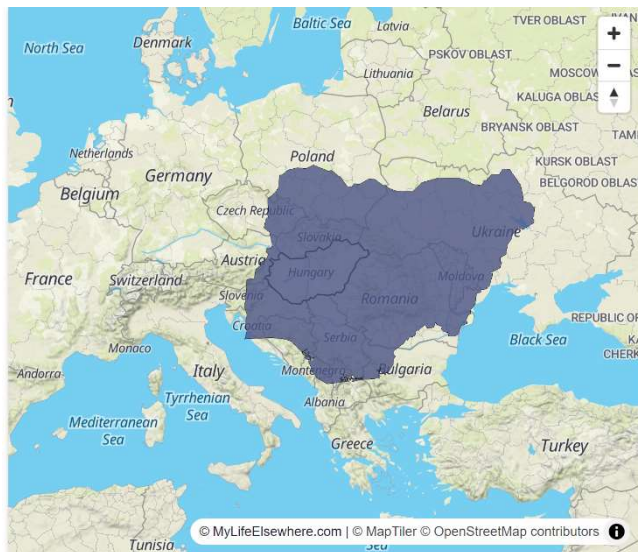
INTRODUCTION

I begin this analysis with the observation that *every* area of human endeavor affected by climate change is important, including human rights, agricultural and food security policy, bilateral relations, and both regional and global security policies. Equally important are the enormous challenges embedded in ongoing strategic conversations about how to mitigate the effects of

climate change that occur daily in the scientific and engineering communities. But, at the end of the day, we are talking about real people, who live in real places, whose lives are adversely affected by armed conflict, state-sponsored and non-state actor violence, armed conflict, and the well-meaning, but sometimes obtuse¹, understandings of how the world works “in real time, on the ground.”

Let’s look at Nigeria as it is, rather than as an abstract entity in West Africa. It is a huge country of 280 million souls which has a young, dynamic, and well-educated population. It is the largest country in Africa, and will have, by some estimates, more than 500 million people by late in the twenty-first century. It is an energy powerhouse, whose importance to the European Union is becoming clearer on a daily basis. Even more significantly, it has the arable land and water, as do many of its neighbors in sub-Saharan Africa, to be the world’s next breadbasket.

So first, some comparisons:



This map shows the relative size of Nigeria in comparison to Central and Eastern Europe. I have deliberately chosen to locate the outline of Nigeria over the areas of Central Europe plagued by the war in Ukraine and the enormous burden imposed by refugee flows.

¹ For a recent, glaring, example of a well-meaning observers who do not appear to understand that a large part of Nigeria’s local violence problem is that the federal police do *not* do a good job protecting the local population from “bandits” and “terrorists,” and that one of the legacies of British Colonial control was an overly-centralized form of government, I commend [Matthew T. Page, Abdul H. Wando, *Halting the Kleptocratic Capture of Local Government in Nigeria*](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (accessed July 26, 2022).

The next map gives us an overlay of Nigeria and the United States, which gives some sense of just how big it is.



Because the focus of the remainder of my written remarks are the indigenous groups in Nigeria and others who are deemed “vulnerable” to discrimination and physical violence because of their minority or other status in their respective communities,, it is, I think, a good idea for the Commission to see just how “indigenous” Nigeria actually is.



Source: <https://onlinenigeria.com/mapethnic.php#>

IMPACT: “VULNERABLE POPULATIONS” AND “INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS”.

I invite the readers of these remarks to visualize East-Central Europe and to compare its enormous ethno-linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity with that in Nigeria. I invite each of you to consider the geographic, cultural and ethno-religious diversity of the area in the American states whose territory is covered by Nigeria overlay. Nobody who knows anything about Europe would confuse Hungary or Finland with Greece, Turkey, Russia, or Ukraine. The same is true for the

United States. Nobody who knows the United States would confuse the politics of, for example, North Georgia and Alabama with those of Chicago and the State of Maryland.

IMPACT: “ARMED CONFLICT” AS A DRIVER OF “IMMIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENT”.

In an effort to bring these remarks even closer to the ground, I would like to shift the focus from Nigeria as a whole to one of the most hotly-contested areas in Nigeria’s “Middle Belt”: Benue State. Once again, let’s begin with some comparisons.

Since Benue State’s area of 13, 150 square miles makes it slightly larger than Maryland (12,406 m², pop: 6.17M) and a bit less than half the size of West Virginia (24,230 m², pop: 1.79M), Maryland’s size and population make it the closer-comparison.

Nickname(s): Food Basket of the Nation



Location of Benue State in Nigeria

Coordinates:  7°20'N 8°45'E

Country	Nigeria
Date created	3 February 1976
Capital	Makurdi
Government	
• Body	Government of Benue State
• Governor	Samuel Ortom (PDP)
• Deputy Governor	Benson Abounu (PDP)
• Legislature	Benue State House of Assembly
• Senators	NE: Gabriel Suswam (PDP) NW: Emmanuel Yisa Orker-Jev (PDP) S: Patrick Abba Moro (PDP)
• Representatives	List
Area	
• Total	34,059 km ² (13,150 sq mi)
• Rank	11th of 36
Population (2006 Census)	
• Total	4,253,641 ^[1]
• Rank	7th of 36

Sources: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benue_State (accessed July 28, 2022)
<https://www.britannica.com/facts/Maryland-state>



Maryland

Image: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Now that we have our points of reference fully planted, we can talk about the war going on in Benue and other parts of Nigeria. I will make the case by quoting, without comment, a recent release by Christian Solidarity International.

Dr. John Eibner, the president of Christian Solidarity International (CSI), wrote to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres urging the UN to fulfill its mandate to prevent genocide in Nigeria. Eibner also expressed his concern about the lack of a reply to a [joint petition](#) about Nigeria delivered to Alice Wairimu Nderitu, his Special Advisor for Genocide Prevention, five weeks ago.

The confidential petition, which concerned the escalating violence against Christians in Nigeria, was delivered in person on 21 June by a delegation led by Reverend Dr. Gideon Para-Mallam. It was signed by Christian Solidarity International and thirteen other human rights defenders and representatives of NGOs active on the ground in Nigeria.

“We are all united in our belief,” the petition stated, that “those of the Christian faith who have for over a decade been singled out for severe persecution, are presently facing an existential threat.”

The petition asked the Special Advisor to “use all the facilities available through your office to prevent or stop genocide and other atrocity crimes against Christians in Nigeria.” It included detailed supporting documentation about the persecution of Nigerian Christians, provided by seven of the petition signers.

Five weeks later, the Office of the Secretary General still has not responded.

In light of this silence, the petition signers decided unanimously to make the [petition](#) public. CSI has taken the additional step of addressing a public letter to the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, about the matter.

“Nigeria now stands at the threshold of Genocide,” Dr. Eibner warned in his letter. “Further silence and inaction will leave the impression that the UN is unable or unwilling to fulfill its mandate when confronted with atrocity crimes of the highest magnitude.”

In December 2020, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court [reported](#) that there was “reasonable basis” to believe that sectarian terrorist groups in Nigeria and the Nigerian Armed Forces have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. CSI issued a [Genocide Warning](#) for Nigeria in January 2020.

Other NGOs which signed the petition include: the Christian Association of Nigeria, the Gideon and Funmi Para-Mallam Peace Foundation, the International Committee on Nigeria, the Christian Lawyers Fellowship of Nigeria, the Overseas Fellowship of Nigerian Christians, Baroness Caroline Cox for the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, the Leah Foundation, the Nigerian Evangelical Fellowship, the International Organisation for Peace and Social Justice, and the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Africa.

What, you say, does any of this have to do with climate change? Simple: The United States Government attributes nearly *all* of the tension in the Middle Belt, and climate change is the designated culprit driving nearly *all* of the over 1.5 million displaced persons living in Benue State.

CONCLUSION

I will close these written remarks with a preview of my oral comments. It is one thing to attribute problems to climate change. It is a far different matter to use climate change as an all-purpose excuse to avoid confronting them. This hearing has identified critically important issues, but nowhere on this agenda are the actual, day-to-day, the concerns and cries of the people who live in Nigeria, and in Benue State.

Just as in the debate over climate change itself, there is an established narrative. There are certain topics that cannot be discussed, even though they would help us to plan and mitigate. In Nigeria those topics include the impacts on the various indigenous people of this wondrous, vast, and dynamic country, the financiers of armed conflict, the state-sponsors of violence, and the ongoing threats to activists, including environmental defenders and religious freedom advocates. If Nigeria were in Europe, our policy makers would certainly see the battle in the Middle Belt, and increasingly in the South, as the entho-religious land-grab that is is. If we can call the war in Ukraine by its proper name, we can do so in Nigeria as well – unless, of course, its oil and gas is too important to rock the boat.

In closing, I will put one other issue on the table that I will expand upon in my oral testimony. Nigeria is experiencing a genocide, whether the State Department wants to acknowledge it or not. Do you imagine for one moment that Nigeria's oil and gas will be sanctioned because of the

violence there? Never. Our career diplomats did not even have the moral courage to renew Nigeria's designation as a International Religious Freedom "Country of Particular Concern."

Ask any of them, as I did (multiple times) of Ambassador Leonard, the Africa Bureau, and my very talented and hard-working colleagues in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

The official position of the United States is that "climate change" explains (and, implicitly, excuses) genocidal behavior funded by foreign governments and non-state actors, and winked at by the United States and the European Union.

Just as it hid from the implications of the genocide in Rwanda, the State Department refuses to map the killing, pressure the Nigerian government to reform the national police, and to give communities like Benue State and its local governmental authorities [LGAs] the power and resources to protect themselves.

The consistent message is: "This is climate change. They are doing the best they can." No, honorable Chairmen, they are not. Nor are we.

In sum: Climate change has become a trump card that shuts down any meaningful discussion about how our policies affect *actual* human beings, whose *actual* human rights are being violated on a daily basis. If we are serious about human rights, and about the "existential" nature of the climate threat, it's time to open the discussion, to stop the censorship, and to talk about real people – not abstract groups and problems – for a change.

Thank you for your attention to this important topic.