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Conflict and Killings in Nigeria's Middle Belt

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Co-Chairs of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, Representative James P. McGovern and Representative Chris H. Smith, for inviting me to testify today. This opportunity is especially timely. In mid-October, I and my colleague, Assistant Secretary Denise Natali, were honored to travel to Nigeria as part of a delegation led by State Department Counselor T. Ulrich Brechbuhl. The trip gave us several significant opportunities to raise our concerns about civilian insecurity and the risk of atrocities with the Vice-President, the Foreign Minister, other senior officials of the Nigerian federal government, with state governors, and with representatives of civil society.

### **Overview of Conflict in Nigeria**

While conflict exists across Nigeria, a major portion of mass killings occur in Nigeria's northern geopolitical zones. Conflict in the North East is primarily associated with attacks by the terrorist groups ISIS-West Africa and Boko Haram and operations by Nigerian security forces to counter these terrorist groups. Together, these conflicts have killed almost 40,000 persons since 2011 according to the Council on Foreign Relations Nigeria Security Tracker. In Nigeria's increasingly lawless North West, civilians are killed by organized criminals, terrorists and through inter-communal violence.

A prime example of the increasing lawlessness in the North West – and of the inability of the police to control it – is the December 11 kidnapping of more than 300 schoolboys in the North West's Katsina State. And, in Nigeria's North Central region, the government also struggles to address the violence.

### **Reports of Atrocities in the North Central Region**

Parts of North Central Nigeria are plagued by deadly inter-communal violence between predominantly Muslim herders and predominantly Christian farmers, as well as by increasing crime. Ambassador Brownback has spoken to the importance of the religious dimensions of the civilian security issue in Nigeria, and to the Secretary's decision to name Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern. While the Nigerian government has expressed its disagreement with that designation, I want to recognize its stated willingness to work with the United States to solve the problems that designation recognizes.

We therefore begin this discussion by recognizing that religion is a factor in the increasingly violent environment in which the good people of Nigeria must live and work on a daily basis.

While the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) is very much engaged in that discussion, I will use my time today to focus on other overlapping factors fueling conflict in the region and the resulting human rights abuses committed against civilians.

Another preliminary point is in order here. Civilian security is the foundation of human rights. Unless a government can protect the lives, property, and human rights of its citizens, freedom as we understand it here in the United States does not exist.

Let's look briefly at the numbers. Violence in the North Central region reached a new high in 2018, when more than 1,500 persons lost their lives in violent attacks, according to the Council on Foreign Relations' Nigeria Security Tracker. Thus far in 2020, more than 600 have died, with Benue, Niger, and Plateau States suffering the worst violence. Disappearances, including kidnapping for ransom, rape, other forms of sexual and gender-based violence, and the destruction of property are common. The consequences for local communities have been devastating. Today there are more than 500,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Benue State alone.

Data analysis shows that herders have carried a great majority of the large-scale attacks against civilians than farmers from January 2015-May 2020. Reprisal killings are common in the North Central region, so it is not a surprise that herder communities also suffer atrocities.

Organized crime remains a persistent problem around the country, including in the North Central region. On August 14, organized criminals on motorbikes attacked a herders' village in Niger State, killing at least 14 people and stealing a large number of cattle.

There are also cases of security forces and police attacking both herding and farming communities for their suspected role in violence. These units are rarely investigated or prosecuted for their excessive use of force. Some government officials exacerbate the violence through incendiary rhetoric that pits communities against one another, a political dynamic that has not gone unnoticed by the State Department.

### **Why do these Atrocities Occur?**

The herder-farmer dynamic in Nigeria is exceedingly complex. Herder-farmer conflict stems from many factors—including religion, as noted earlier— but importantly from resource competition over land and water usage and demographic pressure. Exponential human and livestock population growth and mismanaged and unsustainable land-use policies have exacerbated tensions between herders and farmers. A 2018 Reuters study which utilized United States Geological Survey data of Nigeria revealed that open grazing land available to herders declined by 38 percent from 1975 to 2013 in the North Central region, while farmland increased threefold.

As open grazing land has declined, the region has in turn experienced an influx of foreign herders fleeing violence in the Sahel. These foreign herders, known as Mbororo, are unfamiliar with the informal land sharing agreements brokered between local Nigerian herders and farmers and trespass on farms, inflaming tensions. During our recent trip to Nigeria, Counselor Brechbuhl, Assistant Secretary Denise Natali, and I met with several state governors. One governor described how the cattle of "foreign herders" trample on and eat the crops of his state's farmers, pushing them off their land and denying them their livelihood.

Compounding the struggle over resources are ethnic and religious differences. Some civil society groups frame herder-farmer conflict as a religious conflict between predominantly Muslim herders and predominantly Christian farmers. Some victimized communities also assert that local government officials and security forces exacerbate ethnic and religious tensions by

failing to provide adequate protection or compensation because of their ethnicity or religion. While there are certainly religious undertones to the conflict, it is important to stress that religion is just one driver of the violence. There are numerous examples of Muslim on Muslim and Christian on Christian violence in the North Central region that show that violence in the region is multi-faceted. The reality is that economic and physical insecurity this severe has historically always been a flash point for ethnic, religious, and tribal conflicts, and we risk underestimating the problem if we act on the assumption there is only one root cause, though we must ensure that we consider all causes, including religious motivations, appropriately.

### **The Government of Nigeria's Inadequate Response**

Inadequate security force protection for vulnerable communities and systemic impunity for the perpetrators of killings exacerbates the violence. Nigeria's small, poorly trained and equipped police force is insufficient to address conflict, thereby forcing the government to deploy military resources to stem the violence. Nigerian federal and state-level authorities are largely unable to hold those responsible for abuses accountable or provide justice for victims. Often times it is the security forces alleged to be committing violations and abuses such as extrajudicial killings and torture, which further degrades trust between the civilian population and Nigeria's security forces. During her 2019 visit to Nigeria, Agnes Callamard, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions noted the "repeated failure" of authorities to involve family members of the victims of violence in investigations and prosecution of perpetrators, leaving communities in the dark about accountability efforts.

The Government of Nigeria's response to the conflict dynamics and atrocity risks has largely been reactive. When attacks occur, the government sends in security forces, but they often must travel long distances to rural areas, and sadly they often arrive too late to stop the violence. The government also needs to allocate more resources to state and local governments focused on peacebuilding. During our recent trip, state and local leaders and civil society groups repeatedly complained of inadequate resources to support state-level peacebuilding agencies.

### **Government of Nigeria Efforts to Stem the Violence**

The Nigerian government is taking some action to address the violence, but it is clear it must do more. The military and police are conducting operations in North Central and North West states to clear out bands of criminals. In 2019, Vice President Osinbajo's office launched the National Livestock Transfer Plan to address some of the resource competition issues underlying herder-farmer conflict. The plan is a joint federal-state government initiative to address herder-farmer issues at the state level by modernizing agricultural planning models, returning or resettling IDPs, and establishing mechanisms for community-level conflict resolution and reconciliation. We should find ways to help the government accomplish these goals and end impunity for those who perpetrate violence.

### **Conclusion: Nigeria Needs Immediate Attention**

In closing, I'd like to reiterate a point I often make to my team. The Nigerians are our friends, and they are blessed with rich traditions and a culture of toleration and learning. Nigerians are our close partners in the fight against terror in West Africa. My job as Assistant Secretary in DRL is to look ahead, identifying where serious security and human rights challenges will come in the future. Nigeria is such a place. We are not without options here. Much more must be

done to stem the violence, including supporting state level peacebuilding commissions and developing early warning and response networks to empower local communities to proactively prevent attacks. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on this important human rights issue. I look forward to the discussion today.