

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Hearing
on
Conflict and Killings in Nigeria's Middle Belt**

**December 17, 2020 - 1pm
2172 Rayburn House Office Building and virtual via Cisco WebEx**

**Statement of Nina Shea
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Thank you, Co-Chairmen Smith and McGovern, for holding this important and timely hearing. On December 7, the United States made a significant policy shift on Nigeria when it designated Nigeria as one of world's ten worst abusers of religious freedom, as a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. The government of Nigeria was found to be "engaging in or tolerating" "systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom." Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa were re-designated, in their own rights, as Entities of Particular Concern under the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016.

As Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom Sam Brownback stated in a press conference, a major concern in the CPC designation is "the lack of adequate government response in Nigeria." He said that despite "expanded terrorist activities," and "a lot of it associated around religious affiliations," "the government's response has been minimal to not happening at all." The ambassador was right to note the terror threat this poses: "The terrorism continues to happen and grow, in some places unabated...We don't want this place to devolve into a very difficult, lawless terrain in places." I wholeheartedly agree with his conclusion: "The government really needs to act."

The Nigerian government claims to misunderstand the reason for its CPC designation. In response to it, Pres. Buhari's spokesman said the following:

" Nigeria does not engage in religious freedom violation, neither does it have a policy of religious persecution. Victims of insecurity and terrorism in the country are adherents of Christianity, Islam and other religions".

Nigeria did not address the US concern that Amb. Brownback said warranted the CPC designation, namely, that it is "tolerating" violent aggressors to continue terrorizing innocent Nigerian civilians with impunity. Nigeria was designated for the religious freedom Watch List by State last year and Pres. Trump personally [briefed](#) Pres. Buhari about US government religious atrocity concerns, in 2018. The Nigerian president had ample notice of the US concern.

Indeed, a growing list of places in Nigeria are engulfed in violence and mayhem from various sources, not least, rapidly spreading Islamist extremism. We are still reeling from the dreadful news of the abduction of 344 Middle School boys, on December 11, in Nigeria's Katsina state, apparently by the terror group Boko Haram and its allies. That the boys have been rescued today by security forces is a rare bit of good news.

This atrocity was the latest example of mass attacks against tens of thousands of innocent civilians in the northern and middle areas of Nigeria by several groupings of Islamist extremists and those collaborating and supporting them. This kidnapping follows a pattern of large-scale kidnappings of school children: There are the 112 predominantly Christian schoolgirls from Chibok who remain captive, nearly seven years ago, who were forcibly converted to Islam and taken into sexual enslavement by Boko Haram. There is Leah Sharibu, who, rather than renounce her Christian faith, is suffering this same horrific fate, following a 2018 mass kidnapping in Dapchi of 110 mostly Muslim schoolgirls, all of whom but Leah were released.

In addition to its being an alarming sign of Boko Haram's reach into western Nigeria, this latest case is distinct in that the students include Muslims, albeit ones who reject the extremist views of Boko Haram. I am confident of this because their school specializes in science, a forbidden subject for the terror group. In claiming responsibility for the attack, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau stated in a video:

“What happened in Katsina was done to promote Islam and discourage un-Islamic practices as Western education is not the type of education permitted by Allah and his Holy Prophet. They are also not teaching what Allah and his Holy Prophet commanded. They are rather destroying Islam.”

With a dearth of basic facts, Nigerian authorities, the media and [experts](#) were quick to place blame for the kidnapping solely on “bandits.” Despite the atrocity bearing the hallmarks of Boko Haram's Islamist ideology and following its practice of targeting schoolchildren, as well as Muslims who reject its dictates, the influential Nigeria blog of the Council on Foreign Relations discounted the possibility of any involvement of Boko Haram. On December 15, it posted a piece entitled “Nigeria Schoolboy Kidnapping Likely Criminal, Not Boko Haram,” and concluded that Fulani bandits were responsible, without any consideration that these Fulani could themselves be allied with Boko Haram.

Treating violent attacks as open and shut cases of banditry, in the absence of thorough investigations, is a frequent occurrence in reporting on Nigeria's Middle Belt. Increasingly, these cases are not either, or, but a mix of Islamist terror and criminality. A recent Nigerian news report was headlined that two sisters were released after kidnapping by “bandits.” Deep into the article the freed girls are quoted saying that their captors forcibly converted them to Islam. Clearly more was involved than simply banditry but no doubt the case was dutifully recorded as “banditry” in government databases.

The boys' kidnapping, too, was complex. In the proof of life video, the boys, under instructions from their captors, were seen pleading for the closing of all schools except Qur'anic ones. On Dec. 16, AFP reported that local sources asserted that the operation was carried out on Boko

Haram's orders by a notorious local gangster called Awwalun Daudawa, who enlisted his own gang and two others. The respected Nigerian press [Vanguard](#) reported that Daudawa "was an armed robber and a cattle rustler before he turned to gun-running, bringing in weapons from Libya, where he had received training, and selling them to bandits." It commented, "Over time, he forged an alliance with Boko Haram and became their gunrunner, taking weapons the group seizes from the Nigerian security forces in raids and ambushes and selling them to bandits for a cut." Under international law, this makes these criminals participants in the Islamist terror group Boko Haram, which, itself, is the mastermind of the kidnapping.

Of course, some cases are straight up banditry; however, many bandits in this region appear motivated or mobilized by religious extremism or acting in collusion with such extremists. In these cases, victims are often targeted for their religious views or identity, not solely for purposes of robbery, ransom, rape or human trafficking, but also for the jihadist intent of forcibly converting, punishing, humiliating, or eradicating them. An example is the murder on Dec. 10, in Niger state, of 37-year-old Rev. Jeremiah Ibrahim of Evangelical Church Winning All, and the abduction of his wife, along with four other women, who are now being held hostage for large ransoms.

In addition, as the Council on Foreign Relations observes on its Nigeria blog, extremist groups often finance their campaigns through criminal activity. It is important to acknowledge that there may be more than one intent involved in these terrible attacks. The identification of ideological factors, where they exist, in Nigeria's relentless violence, is key to finding more effective policy solutions.

I recall the searing words of Bishop Kukah of Sokoto at the funeral Mass of seminarian Michael Nnadi, who was murdered in cold blood by kidnappers after he quoted Scripture to them during his captivity:

"We are being told that this situation has nothing to do with Religion. Really? It is what happens when politicians use religion to extend the frontiers of their ambition and power. Are we to believe that simply because Boko Haram kills Muslims too, they wear no religious garb? Are we to deny the evidence before us, of kidnappers separating Muslims from infidels or compelling Christians to convert or die?

The assignment of a single cause to such complex cases is a problem that plagues the State Department's 2020 Religious Freedom Report on Nigeria for 2019. Along with the CPC, the State Department should have issued an addendum to it, based on new and overlooked information that reflects this complexity. More is needed as a basis for effective policy making going forward. And, due to the emphasis and resources the Biden administration will be placing on climate change issues, also a serious problem for Nigeria, I am concerned that the religious freedom threat there could be downplayed and sink into obscurity in the future.

State's report for 2019 narrowly defines the accelerating violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt mainly in terms of mutual hostility between different classes of rural workers over economic competition due to climate change pressures, with religion being incidental. As the report states, it is a "violent conflict over land and water resources, which frequently involved

predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and settled farmers, who were both Muslim and Christian.” Climate change and economic resources, as well as religion -- specifically Islamic extremism -- are all significant in driving this violence. Additionally, some smaller scale defensive and retaliatory violence by Christians against Fulani Muslims has occurred.

State’s report omits all evidence of radicalization among some Fulani, specifically those involved in militant activity, mass atrocities and supporting or working collaboratively with terror groups. It fails to report the important [finding](#) that “Fulani extremists were the most active and deadly perpetrators of terrorism in Nigeria in 2018,” by the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) of the University of Maryland, established as a “center of excellence” by the US Department of Homeland Security, Science and Technology Directorate.

The Fulani in the neighboring Sahel have been recruited by ISIS and Al Qaeda but State’s report neglects to examine whether they or Boko Haram are influencing or linked to segments of Nigerian Fulani; the report raises the Sahel conflicts only to note a questionable theory that “altered grazing routes” have caused conflict because the Fulani herders “are unaware of preexisting agreements between the local herding and farming groups.”

In October, proof of cross border collaboration between networks of criminals and terrorists emerged in the international media when US special forces rescued American hostage Philip Walton from captivity in northern Nigeria. He had been abducted from his home in terror-plagued Niger by six unidentified men armed with AKs and riding motorcycles, and trafficked into Nigeria. American [officials](#) feared he could be sold to Nigerian terrorist groups. Certainly, State has access to information of cross-border radicalization, terrorist recruitment or support among Fulani nomadic herdsman in this area that it should have reported.

The British All Party Parliament Group report of June 2020 finds: “While not necessarily sharing an identical vision, some Fulani herders have adopted a comparable strategy to Boko Haram and Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP). and demonstrated a clear intent to target Christians and symbols of Christian identity such as churches.” It also reported: “During many of the attacks, herders are reported by survivors to have shouted ‘Allah u Akbar’, ‘destroy the infidels’ and ‘wipe out the infidels.’” It noted that some Fulani now carry out raids, armed with AK47s and rocket propelled grenades. The pontifical Aid to the Church in Need found a pattern of cases in which, “the evidence suggests the Fulani herdsman are as committed as Daesh (ISIS) affiliates to eliminating Christians in a region where the Church has grown fast.”

On Dec. 16, 2020, the UK-based CSW reported on Boko Haram’s widening links to the Fulani and other militants across northern and central Nigeria:

In January 2020, Shekau released a video in which he also spoke in the Fulani language, Fulfude, and in early July, an armed group in Niger state declared its allegiance to him. Later that month, [HumAngle](#) revealed that Shekau had cemented alliances with armed groups in Zamfara state in the northwest, and was in the process of formalising relations with groups in Katsina and Sokoto states, also in the northwest, and in Adamawa, Kogi and Taraba states in central Nigeria.

The State report is silent about these ominous signs that Islamist extremism is spreading, along with potential genocide. It fails to mention that Christians, Muslims who reject extremist rules, and international aid workers are the primary civilian targets of the designated Nigerian terror groups. For years, Boko Haram's leader has been pledging in video rants to kill Christians and non-conforming Muslims because, he believes, God wants him to.

The report does not explain government impunity in these egregious matters, the basis, as Amb. Brownback explained, for Nigeria's CPC designation this month. Instead it focuses on crediting the government with bringing about declining numbers of violent incidents – even while acknowledging these numbers are “disputed.” After analyzing hundreds of media reports from 2019 and previous years on Nigerian Fulani attacks on Christians, European legal scholar Jose Luis Bazan concludes: “It is difficult to know the exact number of victims of the attacks since the news usually, in particular when the attacks are massive, mentions a minimum number (“at least...”), or even refers qualitatively to them (“many”, “a large number”).” Bazan notes, this is compounded by officials’ “passive attitude” toward the attacks. This was demonstrated again last week, in the kidnapped schoolboys’ case, where the 344 abducted schoolboys were initially reported to the BBC to number ten by Pres. Buhari’s office.

To reemphasize: Religion is not the only driver of the mass atrocities but an analysis that reduces the violence in the center of the country to socio-economic class clashes due to climate change, as State's Nigeria report does, is, itself, a dangerous oversimplification. It will not lead to appropriate, short term solutions. Most certainly not all 40 million members of the Fulani ethnic group in the region are Islamic extremists, however, there is evidence that some fraction of the Fulani have an explicit jihadist agenda, not only some in the Sahel who are known to have been recruited by the local affiliates of al Qaeda and ISIS, but also some in Nigeria's Middle Belt who may or may not be allied with Boko Haram and other such groups. A mounting number of attacks in this region also evidence deep religious hatred, an implacable intolerance of Christians, and an intent to eradicate their presence by violently driving them out, killing them, or forcing them to convert.

These factors warrant acknowledgement in the State's religious freedom report. The report is wrong to suggest that there are so many “complexities” in Nigeria's situation that it would only deepen the conflict to document them. The State annual reports are premised on the importance of shining light on religious freedom abuses, however “complex,” in order to end them.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

A deepening Islamist extremism in Nigeria's northern and north central states is now readily apparent. Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and with its largest economy, is in crisis. Large regions of the country are becoming “one large graveyard, a valley of dry bones, the nastiest and the most brutish part of our dear country,” as Bishop Kukah lamented. There are even signs of genocide, the most heinous of human rights crimes. Nigeria's instability threatens to destabilize the region.

Secretary Pompeo has taken an important step this month in designating Nigeria as a CPC. USAID has also played an important role this year in supporting faith-based groups under fire in Nigeria's hotspots. However, the State Department's human rights and religious freedom programming in Nigeria to address these urgent concerns has been grossly inadequate, if not missing entirely.

The following steps are urgently needed:

1. The Secretary issued a waiver to CPC sanctions on Nigeria, generally. Before he steps down, he should issue personalized Global Magnitsky Act sanctions and targeted visas denials for Nigerian officials and others responsible for "engaging in or tolerating" egregious religious attacks.
2. Any remaining funds of the "at least \$50 million, designated by President Trump in his Executive Order on Advancing Religious Freedom should be approved by the Secretary of State for programming aimed in Nigeria to "anticipate, prevent and respond to attacks," under Section 3 of the EO, before this administration leaves office. This should include a serious investigation and public reporting on the role and nature of atrocities being committed by Fulani militants. The scale and gravity of the religious attacks requires immediate action.
3. Congress should request a transparent accounting for the \$50 million funds provided under the June 2, 2020 Executive Order, as well as for the hundreds of millions of dollars it appropriated in the current fiscal year for the Religious and Ethnic Minority fund the Atrocity Prevention fund, and other funds under the purview of State's DRL Bureau. There is reason for concern that the current administration is walking away with substantial amounts of these funds unspent despite urgent needs in Nigeria and elsewhere.
4. Congress should adopt a resolution requiring the State Department to make a determination by a date certain on potential ethno-religious genocide and crimes against humanity by Boko Haram, Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP), other Islamist extremist groups and Fulani militants.
5. Congress should debate and adopt a resolution affirming the responsibility of Boko Haram, Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP), other Islamist extremist groups and Fulani militants for ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in the northern and north central areas of Nigeria.