

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
ATROCITIES AND MASS KILLINGS IN NIGERIA'S MIDDLE BELT
December 17, 2020 – 1:00 p.m.
2172 Rayburn

Statement of Baroness Catherine Cox
CEO of Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust

As CEO of Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART), I have had the painful privilege of visiting some of the worst affected areas and have heard directly from survivors of attacks. They have shared – with immense bravery and with tears – personal tragedies of mass slaughter, torture, amputations, rape, forced displacement and destruction of homes, churches and farmland.

One lady called Antonia, from Karamai, told me: “I saw my brother-in-law’s body on the ground, hacked to pieces by a machete. Our home was destroyed. The hospital was burnt. They tried to burn the roof of the church by piling up the chairs, like a bonfire.”

A pastor from Madugrui said: “Every day we carry new corpses to the cemetery. They kill farmers. They destroy our homes and churches. They kidnap and rape women.” I also wept with Veronica, from Dogon Noma, who told me: “They attacked me with a machete twice, once to the neck and once to my hand.” I saw the scars. She said: “They said they wanted my daughter to suck my finger. So they amputated my forefinger and I passed out. When I woke up, I saw my six year-old daughter on the ground, dead, with my chopped finger in her mouth.”

Similar harrowing testimonies were considered in detail in the Report to the UK Foreign Secretary last year by the Bishop of Truro, in which he concluded: “Some of the most egregious persecution of Christians has taken place in Sub-Saharan Africa... the most widespread and violent threat came from societal groups, including many with a militant Islamist agenda.... Reports consistently showed that in Nigeria, month after month, on average hundreds of Christians were being killed for reasons connected with their faith... Those worst affected included Christian women and girls abducted, and forced to convert, enter forced marriages, sexual abuse and torture.”

I, and many colleagues in Parliament, have frequently sought to raise these serious concerns with the UK Government with Questions, debates, evidence to inquiries, formal letters --- and recently by the publication of a report by the APPG for Freedom of Religion or Belief, entitled ‘*Nigeria:*

Unfolding Genocide?’, which records that thousands of civilians have been killed in attacks led by Islamist Fulani militia and periodic retaliatory violence.

To date, the UK Government’s response has been woefully inadequate. Even as militant groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province) sweep across the Sahel, imposing their radical ideologies with violence on those who refuse to comply, the UK Government appears to underplay the scale of massacres or refuses to acknowledge that a possible genocide may be occurring.

The Nigerian Government has also been seriously remiss in protecting its civilians and bringing perpetrators of killings to account – so it is some encouragement that, earlier this week, the International Criminal Court called for an inquiry into war crimes and crimes against humanity. It is also encouraging that the US State Department have (after much delay) designated Nigeria as Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act.

The causes of violence in middle-belt states are, of course, complex. The APPG inquiry examined multiple drivers of conflict, including rapid population growth, climate change and desertification, which have decreased the water available for land and grazing

But given the escalation, frequency, organisation, brutality and asymmetry of attacks by Islamist Fulani militants against predominantly-Christian communities, we argue that the US and UK must fulfil its obligations as a signatory to the 1948 Genocide Convention and its duty to protect.

It is not sufficient for our Governments merely to “emphasise the importance of mediation and inter-faith dialogue” – important though these are. For the longer these massacres and atrocities, are tolerated, the more the perpetrators are emboldened. We give them a ‘green light’ to carry on their killings and destruction with impunity.