Written Submission

Submitted to the

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

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Hearing on: "Conflict and Killings in Nigeria's Middle Belt"

December 17th, 2020

Co-Chairmen Smith and McGovern, Members of the Tom Lantos Commission, and distinguished guests, it is an honor to have written this statement. It is my privilege to introduce myself to the Honourable Members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the United States House of Representatives. Thank you for convening this group to have this important conversation to save lives in my home country.

My invitation to submit evidence to this Honourable Committee was based on my work spanning over 20 years as a religious leader and an academic. I was born and raised in Wukari, Taraba State, in what is known as the "Middle Belt" of Nigeria. My home state and the village where I live has been one of the epicenters of conflict between the farming and herding communities and other ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria. I have observed and engaged on several fronts with farmer-herder conflicts, a conflict that has become one of the most misinterpreted and divisive in my country, especially in the Middle Belt, where ethnicity, politics, and religion intersect with disputes over access to resources, demographic challenges, criminality and governance deficit. 24 out of 36 states in Nigeria have witnessed inter-communal violence in the last five years, often categorized as farmer-herder conflict. I have personally witnessed the violence in many territories and villages which have been attacked, including Kente, Wukari and Ibi in Taraba State. Gwer West, Agatu in Benue State and several others.

I have dedicated my life as a Roman Catholic Priest to promoting religious tenets and tolerance to my congregation and to my broader community. As an academic, I understand and preach the importance of using education for dialogue, peace and justice as a transformative paradigm for non-violence in my current positions as the Head of Department (HOD) Religious Studies and the Chaplain St. Francis of Assisi Chaplaincy Federal University Wukari - Taraba State, Nigeria; member of the Governing Council of the University; Executive Director of the Foundation for Peace, Hope, and Conflict Management (FPHCM); and committed member of the Forum on Farmer and Herder Relations in Nigeria (FFARN), coordinated by Search for Common Ground (Search), the leading platform for addressing the challenges between farming and herding communities in the country. I hold over ten years of experience working to mitigate violent conflicts between several warring tribes and ethnic groups in Nigeria.

I am honored to be able to share my insights and understanding of the unspeakable violence that has taken the lives of countless numbers of my Nigerian brothers and sisters. The term "farmer-herder" conflict is used to cover a number of conflicts that relate to economic livelihoods, natural resources, governance, and security challenges in northern Nigeria. "Farmer-herder" conflicts have become the most misinterpreted and divisive conflict in my country, especially in the Middle Belt, where ethnicity, politics, and religion intersect with disputes over access to resources, demographic challenges, criminality, and governance deficit. However, in my statement, I will address the role of religion in the conflict, including how religion is used by different interest groups and how religion could be used to promote reconciliation between farmers and herders in Nigeria.

Religion is a cultural system of designated behaviors and practices, morals, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organizations that relates humanity to supernatural, transcendental, or spiritual elements. Religion is deeply embedded in all aspects of Nigerian life – shaping not only our morality, but how we live in the world.

Religion has been implicated in all sorts of conflict and violence throughout human history and indeed in my own country. There is blood on the hands of the faithful, and no avoiding the fact that in the service of the wrong people, religion can be a force of great harm. It's true that religion has been a major feature in some historical conflicts and the most recent wave of modern terrorism. Religion has taken on extra significance today because globalization is challenging and changing everything. Religious identity not only survives, but can take on heightened significance when national and political alliances break apart. Like both law and politics, religion can be used to defend the oppressed and to oppress the defenseless. In the midst of all the violence, religion and religious leaders play a very paramount and significant role. This includes seeking to constructively engage the leadership of the deployed security personnel and proactively foster improved communication and relationships within their communities, because they are trusted and respected by the communities they serve and can be influential in connecting security actors with civilians, building relationships between the two, and increasing mutual awareness.

In farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria, a variety of factors are driving violence, including livelihoods competitions for land and water resources, criminality, and impunity. There are three key dynamics of religion that are important to understand regarding the violence in the Middle Belt:

1. **Historical and ongoing "indigene-settler" conflicts have devolved into religious divisions.** In Nigeria, a person's status as "indigene" or "settler" impacts one's access to public services and opportunities. Indigenes are considered to be the original and ancestral inhabitants of the land, whereas settlers are those that have migrated to the area over time. Even though "settlers" may have lived in an area for hundreds of years, they are not afforded the same political, social, and civic rights as indigenes. This results in disparate systems for land ownership, control of commerce, political opportunities, jobs, and education. Often, what appears to be an ethnic or religious conflict is closely linked to the "indigene-settler" divide surrounding competition for political and economic influence. In Taraba and in other states in the Middle Belt, these indigene/settler divides match up with similar Christian/Muslim demarcations.

2. **Misinformation, "fake news," and inflammatory rhetoric based on unresolved grievances and biases have deepened divisions between Muslims and Christians.** As purveyors of "fake news" understand how certain sentiments appeal to a particular public, they use religious, tribal, or political framings to inundate people with fake news and to encourage them to act on their biases and beliefs. In my own community, ethnic tensions and rivalries between Tiv and Jukun ethnic groups along the Taraba/Benue state border have combined with the toxic narrative of "Fulani invasion" that has been used to describe violence in the Middle Belt. In some cases where no Fulani have been involved, perpetrators of violence are still reported as "suspected Fulani herdsmen." The continuance of this unsubstantiated "blame game" has helped no one. The lack of accountability and strong, sensitive reporting has fuelled violence, fear, and division. People are not willing to invest in quality news gathering, and many journalists expect that they can only achieve success by using sensational headlines that appeal to peoples' already held assumptions.

   Often, the media conflates incidences of the three types of violent conflicts described above under the heading of "farmer-herder conflict" or ethno-religious violence in the Middle Belt. Using these descriptors interchangeably is incredibly dangerous, as it shapes public understanding of the conflict. Nigerian journalists generally have inadequate training on conflict reporting and operate with limited financial and logistical capacity to cover rural areas. Journalists depend on

"informants" who allegedly were present at the "scene of the violence" or representatives of "ethnic or religious groups" from the affected areas. The direct parties to and victims of the conflict – farmers and herders in rural communities – often have limited direct access to journalists and media platforms to articulate their experiences and concerns. Both parties have in different degrees argued that opinions presented by the "representatives" do not represent their concerns. Social media further complicates the situations through "unconfirmed reports."

3. **Christians and Muslims alike have used religion to recruit people into self-defense militias.** Farming and herding communities experience resource pressures, fear of attack, and limited livelihood prospects. Most survive on a subsistence basis and act out of protection for their lives, property, and livelihoods. It is critical that we address these core issues to end violence. In communities in the far northern state where a particular religion is more populous than the other religion, the conflict is seen primarily through a religious lens. Given the history of religious violence in Nigeria combined with the ongoing political and social disparities between certain ethno-religious groups, it is a natural reflex to understand this current violence as religiously motivated. As this perception increases tension, oftentimes the people of the minority religion feel insecure and start to relocate to another environment or back to their own states. In some poor rural communities, both Christians and Muslims have financed the acquisition of sophisticated weapons by going house-to-house to task community members of the same religion to contribute a given amount of money for this purpose. They are also asked to send letters to the indigenous sons and daughters who live outside the community to provide additional funds to acquire weapons for self-defense.

Despite the many challenges that Nigerians face to overcome these obstacles to lasting peace, I have seen many promising initiatives led by Nigerians to curb these tensions and promote peace by increasing understanding and tolerance between religious groups. Civil society organizations and religious actors and bodies have been working with herder/farmer communities at the local level to reach local peace agreements to coexist and share land resources, support the establishment of local security architectures, encourage complementary livelihoods, and share inter-ethnic and inter-religious cultural awareness. I have had the privilege of being involved in several of these efforts, as described below. As the U.S. government examines how to address longstanding conflict in Nigeria, it remains imperative to fund, support, and amplify community-based structures and initiatives for mitigating tensions, transforming conflict, and reconciling divided communities.

1. **We are still able to bring people together across dividing ethnic and religious lines.** In August of this past year, The Foundation for Peace, Hope, and Conflict Management – an organization I recently co-founded to build peace among tribes, religious groups, and ethnic groups – hosted a three-day summit for fifty women from the Tiv and Jukun ethnic groups and different religious groups in Taraba and Benue states. They discussed how they have been affected by the conflict and solutions regarding how to end the violence, and participated in trainings on dialogue and mediation, conflict analysis, and conflict resolution and peacebuilding to be equipped with the skills necessary to lead related activities in their various communities following the summit.

2. **There are some efforts by media and community groups to build trust and improve cultural understanding between groups who share different languages, lifestyles, and traditions.** In partnership with Global Rights, FPHCM organised a TV advocacy program to commemorate the National Day of Mourning, express solidarity with grieving communities and accord dignity to every Nigerian life lost to this violence, and call on the government and relevant stakeholders such as traditional rulers, religious bodies, media, and civil society organizations to join efforts towards ensuring peace and security in the State.

3. **Nigerians have created efforts to make national evidence-based policies work for communities affected by this violence.** One such initiative, the Forum on Farmer and Herder Relations in Nigeria (FFARN), coordinated by Search for Common Ground, is the leading platform in this space to improve the connection between scholarship, peace programming, and policy. FFARN is a network of academics and practitioners from governmental and non-governmental institutions who work on peace, conflict, and security issues in Nigeria and who have experience responding to farmer-herder conflict at sub-national, national, and/or regional levels. FFARN provides a monthly platform for interdisciplinary exchange and joint identification of areas for additional research and practice to generate strong evidence from peacebuilding scholarship and practice for international and national programmatic and policy influence on farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria. The network has far created policy briefs and white papers on, and hosted regional delegations of leaders dealing with, issues ranging from an analysis of existing responses by government and non-government actors at the community, state, and national levels with recommendations for future initiatives to resolve the violence to transnational dimensions of farmer-herder conflict in the Western Sahel and Lake Chad Basin to religious dimensions of the conflicts. FFARN enjoys a close relationship with personnel in the U.S. Embassy and other key policy influencers in the area, allowing USG political decision-makers and Nigerian civil society actors to collaborate on sustainable solutions.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this written submission.