



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Nigeria: Conflict in the Middle Belt

September 27, 2017

2:00 – 3:30 PM

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good afternoon. I join my colleague and Co-Chair Randy Hultgren in welcoming you to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on conflict in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. And I also add my thanks to our witnesses for joining us today. We appreciate your presence, knowledge and commitment to ending armed conflicts around the world.

As many of you may know, one of my top priorities in the years I've been in Congress has been to end hunger here at home and abroad. I believe that access to adequate food is a right, and I believe that we in this country have a moral obligation to our own citizens, and to families and children around the world, to make sure that everyone has good, nutritious food every single day.

What you may not realize is that hunger does not just occur “naturally.” Hunger is a political condition – it happens when governance fails and shared resources become impossible.

We know that food insecurity can give rise to violent conflict or make it worse -- and that conflict in turn drives hunger by disrupting planting and harvesting, destroying livelihoods, distorting markets, displacing people and limiting humanitarian access. In brief, the way we end hunger is by having the political will to deal with the human-made conditions that cause it.

I raise this because the country we are talking about today, Nigeria, is already suffering from one major famine centered in the northeast. The most affected states – Borno and Yobe – are part of the Lake Chad basin. Lake Chad has physically shrunk by 98 percent since 1960 due

to overuse of water resources by farmers and climate change, dramatically altering livelihoods and basic economic activity in the region.

The Boko Haram conflict has exacerbated these issues, leaving 5.2 million people in severe need of food aid. This situation is one of the “four famines” that have been in the news and attracted the attention of Congress in recent months.

Today we’re focusing not on the north, but on the entire “Middle Belt” of Nigeria, a huge cross-section of the country, where conflict has been increasing between nomadic herdsman, who are largely Muslim, and settled farming communities, who are largely Christian.

It’s hard to get good statistics on how destructive these herder-farmer conflicts are. But the International Crisis Group, one of our witnesses today, has estimated that 2,500 people were killed in 2016 alone – more than the Boko Haram conflict in some years. And in 2015 Mercy Corps estimated that these clashes in just four of the Middle Belt states cost Nigeria \$13.7 billion per year in Gross Domestic Product.

As we will hear, these inter-communal conflicts have been going for a while – some for decades – driven by competition for resources against a background of environmental degradation, population growth, land-grabbing by politicians and banditry.

But here’s the thing: they are now taking on a religious and ethnic overlay that threatens to make them even more intractable. Nothing bodes worse for peace than when identity, resources and retaliatory violence line up together.

Nigeria is an incredibly important place. It is Africa’s most populous country – 190 million people, with more than 250 ethnic groups. Instability in Nigeria is extremely worrying for the entire region and it should be of great concern to the United States.

So, I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today. I hope they will offer us concrete steps that the U.S. Congress can and should take to help halt the cycle of violence in the Middle Belt before it gets any more entrenched.

Otherwise, we know that food insecurity will spread; hunger will spread; and we could end up seeing famine conditions extending south throughout the country. The last thing we need is to give extremist groups the opportunity to offer food as a recruiting tool, as we’ve seen ISIS and others do.

I am proud that the U.S. does its part to respond to hunger and famine around the world by providing humanitarian assistance. The United States – with strong leadership and funding

from Congress – has committed nearly \$402.7 million for humanitarian activities supporting Nigerian households in the Lake Chad region in FY 2017.

But as humanitarian crises continue to explode around the world, funding appeals by the U.N. almost always fall short. Frankly, there is never enough money to fully respond to these crises. And there is always a risk of “donor fatigue” – people can get tired of trying to help when there’s a new crisis on the horizon every day.

We need to figure out how to prevent these crises in the first place – which means we have to recognize their complexity and find the political will to tackle the underlying inequalities and injustices. If human beings can create the conditions that generate so much misery and suffering, surely we can figure out a way to transform them.

Thank you and I yield back my time.