



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 and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's hearing on the ongoing inter-communal conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt. I would like to thank our distinguished experts for taking time out of their busy schedules and important work to testify before the Commission on this topic today.

The clashes between predominately Muslim cattle-herding nomadic groups and mostly Christian settled farming populations in Nigeria's Middle Belt is not new. However, around three years ago there was a massive uptick in violence, and the death toll went from a few dozen to being measured in thousands. One estimate shows that there were 2,500 deaths in the Middle Belt in 2016, and that does not convey the amount of injuries, loss of property, and rising insecurity.

Unlike the better-known Boko Haram insurgency in northern Nigeria, this conflict is not directed by a single organized militant group motivated by extremist ideology. Rather, it is a cycle of violence between some Fulani herders and local farmers in the Middle Belt.

Throughout this region there have been attacks by both groups, often with fatalities. On the one hand, Christian farmers are attacked and killed with impunity and their crops are severely damaged. On the other, cattle herders argue that their livelihoods are suffering from smaller grazing lands and an increase in violent cattle rustling. All involved in the conflict believe that they neither receive sufficient protection nor see these crimes punished.

In the absence of credible protection from the national and local governments against such attacks, vigilantism and revenge killings are also on the rise.

There are a few key reasons why this conflict – which is already a human rights tragedy of large proportions – has the potential to increase dramatically in scope. The first is that even though in recent years this conflict has claimed nearly as many lives as the Boko Haram insurgency, it is receiving far less attention from the government of Nigeria and the international community. This lack of attention – whether due to a deliberate decision to downplay the conflict or the result of an unwillingness to address the crisis – is particularly worrisome.

The government of Nigeria, including the local governments of the Middle Belt states, needs to take action that will assure those in the Middle Belt that they are protected by the rule of law – and let perpetrators know that they will face punishment.

Nigeria is a country of 186 million people. It has Africa's largest economy, and in many ways, has reason to be proud of the increasing resilience of its democratic politics. But it is also an ethnically and religiously diverse country, with links to ethnic groups in nearly every other country in West Africa.

If this conflict is allowed to fester unchecked, the risk of embroiling the entire country is real. And with a population as large as Nigeria's, that would affect countless millions of people. And the risk that – like Boko Haram – this violence could spread beyond Nigeria is also a possibility.

Our panelists today will discuss the root causes of this conflict, and suggest ways to prevent an escalation from what is an already tragic cycle of violence to a human rights catastrophe. This is a complicated conflict, and our experts will present viewpoints that are not always in agreement. However, I believe that in the end, many of their recommendations on how this problem can be addressed will be similar.

I look forward to hearing their analysis, and even more to hearing their recommendations for concrete action and workable solutions.

###