

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
United States House of Representatives

Hearing on
Nigeria: Conflict in the Middle Belt
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Testimony of Ms. Olubukola Ademola-Adelehin
Conflict Analyst, Nigeria
Search for Common Ground

Co-Chairmen Hultgren and McGovern, Members of the Lantos Commission, and distinguished guests, it is an honor to join you here today for this important conversation about protracted violent conflict involving farmers and herders in Nigeria. The timing of this hearing is critical. Today, violence between these two groups continues in the Middle Belt and is expanding into new areas of the country, putting new communities at risk of entering vicious cycles of violence. Last year, pastoral conflicts caused more deaths in Nigeria than Boko Haram. At least 1,425 people lost their lives in clashes between farmers and herders.ⁱ In the past two years, 24 out of Nigeria's 36 states and Abuja have experienced violence attributed to farmer-herder issues. Recent escalations have created new conflict dynamics that polarize communities and threaten to destabilize Nigeria and the wider region.

My name is Olubukola Ademola-Adelehin, and I am the Conflict Analyst and technical lead for Search for Common Ground's conflict early warning system in Nigeria. I am based in Abuja, and I am pleased to join you here today. Search for Common Ground (Search) is one of the largest organizations working to address farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria and is one of the leading conflict transformation and peacebuilding organizations in the world. Search began its operations in Nigeria in 2004 and currently has a team of over 55 staff and many local partners who work across four offices in Abuja, Jos, Maiduguri, and Yola. Our guiding mission is to end violence in Nigeria by transforming the way people deal with conflict, away from adversarial approaches and towards corporative solutions. I will draw on my experience with Search and over a decade working for peaceful resolution of conflict in communities in Nigeria and West Africa, but my views are my own.

My first experience seeing the impact of farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria took place in 2005. I met with a group of women in Jos, Plateau state who had experienced the brunt of violent farmer-herder conflict. I listened to their harrowing tales of loss of family members, injury, sexual violence, trauma, betrayal, displacement, helplessness, and hopelessness. As they relayed their stories, their experiences of attacks in places such as Shendam and Yelwa shocked me and seemed completely disconnected from my life in faraway Lagos, a cosmopolitan city in the south west region, seemingly far removed from this type of conflict. But in the 12 years since that first meeting, I have heard similar stories over and over again from communities not just in Plateau, but around the country. I have heard the pains and agony of countless communities, including the massacre in Dogo Na Hauwa, where over 500 people were killed in 2010, including women, children, and the elderly, killings in Tiv and Agato communities in Benue, bloodshed in southern Kaduna, and recent attacks on Fulani communities in Mabilla Plateau in Taraba state just this month. It is clear that this type of conflict is becoming more common, more geographically diverse, and

more challenging to control. The pain of communities caught in the divide is heartbreaking. They need help to get out of the vicious and complex cycle of this resources-based conflict.

I would like to share with you a brief introduction to the conflict and then highlight the latest trends that I am seeing in farmer-herder violence, cite examples of promising efforts, and suggest how the United States and her government can support the Nigerian people to address the root causes of this conflict, mitigate violence, and support economic growth that is good for Nigeria and her international partners.

The Violent Farmer-Herder Conflict in Nigeria is Situated Within a Larger Context of Ethno-Religious Division, Inadequate State Response, and Competition for Resources

Prior to the 1970s, farming communities and Fulani herders (both settled and nomadic) peacefully co-existed and mutually benefited from their symbiotic relationship that enabled farmers to keep croplands fertile and cattle well-nourished. Herders had access to free crop residue for the herds to feed on after harvests, and farmers had access to free manure to fertilize crops. This harmonious relationship between these groups was critical for sustainable livelihoods and food security in Nigeria. Though conflicts between these groups at this time were rare, the government began efforts to mitigate any tensions and prevent violence, recognizing the importance of this symbiosis. As early as 1965, the post-colonial northern regional government began its first attempt to establish grazing reserves and cattle routes as a deliberate effort to avert or mitigate natural resource-based clashes between farmers and herders. However, neglect in upkeep and contentious districting doomed these attempts to failure. Other attempts were made in 1989 by the current president, President Buhari, then Chairman of Petroleum Trust Fund (PTF), and by the Pastoral Resolve, a non-Governmental Organization, to establish and rehabilitate grazing reserves and livestock routes across the country.

The peaceful co-existence of these two groups began to break down starting in the 1970s. Through my work with Search, I have spoken with many different groups affected by or participating in this conflict, from the farmer and herder communities themselves, victims of violence, and the security forces and local government actors tasked with resolving this conflict. I have conducted research in Benue, Kaduna, Nasarawa, Plateau, and Taraba states, utilizing interviews and focus groups to understand what fuels this conflict. This research, coupled with our programmatic experience, has outlined some common drivers across the Middle Belt, and these are representative of a wider trend across Nigeria.

- 1. Socially, the violence results from the dovetailing of ethno-religious identities into farmer-herder conflict:** Conflict between farmers and herders in Nigeria is neither ethnic nor religious. It is the result of competition for natural resources such as arable land, access to water points, and markets. However, the recent escalation in the Middle Belt and southern regions of Nigeria show how ethnic and religious overtones are now infiltrating the conflict, changing the way that disputes are perceived and deepening divides. For example, crop damages from herds, many of which are led by the predominantly Muslim Fulani herders, that may have been seen as an accidental act in the past are now perceived as deliberate and provocative acts against farmers, many of whom are Christian. This narrative, shaped and perpetuated by the media, has triggered the reactions of farming communities to see Fulani herders as both competitors for natural resources and part of an agenda to annihilate their way of life.
- 2. Economically, the violence is a result of the skyrocketing demand for and price of cattle:** As Nigeria's cities have grown, demand for meat has increased and cattle prices have skyrocketed. In the last two decades, herd sizes have increased more than 40%, and cattle prices have quadrupled. A single cow now goes for as much as \$1700, making herds of cows hugely valuable. As a result, the cattle industry has professionalized from the traditional smallholder, subsistence herders to larger herds owned by wealthy individuals with hired guards and professional cattle rustlers. Sophisticated groups of rustlers have benefited from instability and impunity, coordinating attacks to profit off cattle theft

and trade. These “conflict entrepreneurs” in the Northeast and Northwest have preyed on displaced and mobile communities, often attacking in the middle of the night, burning homes and shooting guns in the air to cause people to flee and then looting their livestock. In Kaduna state, more than 11,500 cows were reported rustled in just three months in 2017 by armed groups with sophisticated weapons.ⁱⁱ

- 3. Environmentally, violence results from resource degradation and changing production techniques:** Farmer-herder conflict is fundamentally a competition for scarce resources. Changes in farming techniques and subsistence have altered the Nigerian landscape and farmer-herder relations. The introduction of artificial fertilizers in the 1970s and 1980s, and their intensive utilization by farmers in the 1990s, dealt a major blow to the previously symbiotic relationships between farmers and herders. Farmers could now effectively fertilize their fields without reliance on the manure of grazing herds. As a result, more cattle routes were blocked by expanding farms, and many grazing reserves were used for developmental purposes, abandoned, or used to farm. At the same time, extensive deforestation, the desertification of Lake Chad, and shortened rainy seasons have diminished soil quality, pastures, and crop yields. Nigeria’s government has documented the shrinkage of more than 800 bodies of water as a contributing cause of violence. Diminishing land and water resources both contribute to and result from the increased migration of pastoralists further south, increasing the frequency with which farmers and herders come into contact and conflict.

Recently, the Nigerian government has also attempted to address the conflicts through controversial legislation on grazing reserves throughout the country. While the 2016 national bill failed to pass in the National Assembly, it sparked the passage of legislation in Benue and Taraba states. Fulani herdsmen, under the aegis of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders’ Association, have protested strongly and opened a lawsuit against the Benue State Government. The laws have generated controversy due to lack of clarity and misrepresentation as an eviction notice to Fulani herdsmen. The implementation of legislation that is perceived as partial risks inciting further violence, deepening feelings of fear and mistrust, and entrenching stereotypes of ‘indigene’ and ‘settler’ and ethno-religious identities.

- 4. Politically, violence results from an over-reliance on security based-response and poor management of diminishing land resources:** The government has deployed security agencies as its primary response to the Middle Belt violence. Security responses are often delayed, with forces showing up long after active attacks are reported. Perpetrators of attacks are rarely apprehended or prosecuted. In some cases, security forces are perceived to be complicit in the violence or directly responsible for attacks on civilians. I met with a Fulani ardo in Nasarawa who still awaits answers for a raid on his home by security forces five years ago that left two of his sons dead. The over-reliance on militarized responses has fractured relationships between the “protectors” and those they are supposed to protect. As feelings of insecurity fester, community members have armed themselves to take on their own security. Small arms and light weapons are readily available in the Middle Belt, and many are being locally produced, utilized by a pool of mobilized and militarized youth.

Opportunities to Address Underlying Drivers of Conflict and Shift Conflict Dynamics

While the current conflict dynamics between farmers and herders reflects the social, economic, environmental, and political changes affecting rural Nigeria, violence is not inevitable. The situation is not hopeless. As I speak with colleagues throughout the Middle Belt and wider Nigeria – from Maiduguri to Port Harcourt – I see a few promising interventions that are making real change. This is particularly true in the Middle Belt, where this conflict first erupted.

Civil society interventions in Plateau, Kaduna, Nasarawa, and Benue states are increasingly successful in reversing pervasive ethno-religious narratives on farmer-herder conflict and diffusing tensions that could lead to violence. For instance, we worked with the Igbagbo community in Doma, Nasarawa state to facilitate

‘community response networks’ that identify security threats and manage emerging conflicts. The representatives from the farming and herding communities in this project cited farmland encroachment and destruction of cultivated farms as the main sources of tension. In response, the group agreed to enforce 15-30 feet of buffer space next to farmland to protect farms from destruction and provide sufficient passage for large herds to access water and graze. This is just one example of the ways Nigerians are working to prevent violence in their communities.

I would like to underscore three key opportunities for civil society and private sector engagement to mitigate violence.

- 1. First, civil society groups, including Search, are developing “Peace Architecture” approaches to inclusive governance in Nigeria, which put communities back at the center of security, improve security outcomes, and lead to more targeted responses to violence.** We recognize the unique context of each community and engage local actors, such as the religious community, media, and civil society, to work along with government actors to identify and address emerging tensions and disputes between farmers and herders. For example, through these platforms, farmers and herders have collaboratively facilitated return of both groups who were displaced from past conflict in Kaduna state; assigned community groups to patrol and inspect destroyed farmland and created ‘safe corridors’ for moving herds through Nasarawa; and prohibited the use of children as herdsmen and banned night grazing of cattle in Plateau, among many other responses. Dialogue platforms resolve issues relating to farm encroachment and crop destruction disputes through mutually agreed compensation or mediation.
- 2. Second, 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.** Misunderstanding and the lack of information – sometimes played up by sensationalist media and cynical political elites – has driven polarization. Many non-Fulani do not know much about the Fulani identity, culture, or lifestyle. Not all Fulani are herdsmen, nor are all cattle owners Fulani. Civil society organizations in Nigeria are working to build avenues for interaction and cooperative solutions between farming and herding communities. Cultural festivals, such as Search for Common Ground’s *I Will Follow the Green Grass* celebrate the histories of herdsmen and farmers alike, enabling exchange and humanization between groups. Other initiatives target children and youth through call-in radio shows and radio dramas to promote tolerance and healing.
- 3. Third, investment in agribusiness and cattle value chain development can create shared economic interests for peace and stability.** Current rain-fed, seasonal, and subsistence farming habits stunt the viability of crops, limit agricultural output, and reduce the resilience of farmers to economic losses resulting from damaged or destroyed crops. At the same time, current practices of moving herds at the onset of dry season increases the stress on the animals, resulting in poor production and quality of meat and dairy, vulnerability to disease, and exposure to cattle theft. Investments in sustainable, modern agricultural practices, value chain development, and land management will equip farmers and herders to move beyond subsistence and increase their resilience to shocks. For example, investments in slaughterhouses, refrigerated trucking and railcars, and surrounding livelihoods, such as tanneries, can help to mitigate the economic incentive for southward cattle migrations. By investing in agricultural improvements and developing infrastructure to sustain a more formal and efficient farming and livestock production, the private sector can help bring more Nigerians to work and fulfil high-demand for crops and meat.

Role of the U.S. Government and International Actors

The United States has been at the forefront of supporting Nigeria to chart a bright future. Nigeria is an important political, security, and economic partner for the United States in Africa, as the world’s fourth

largest democracy, a fast-growing population of nearly 200 million people, and one of the United States' top-50 export markets, importing over \$5.5 billion of US-originated goods per year. We need the support of the U.S. Government as we face a variety of crises that could undermine our stability, security, and role in the region and world. In the same way that Nigeria's economic growth and relative political stability can be exported to its neighbors, so too can its fragility and conflict.

I would like to offer four main recommendations to the U.S. Government:

- 1. Support Nigerian government counterparts to develop a holistic strategy to reduce fragility and conflict that addresses root causes and not just consequences.** The U.S. and Nigerian governments' approaches to conflict in Nigeria have been primarily responsive to consequences of violence as crises emerge, rather than addressing root causes. The U.S. government should engage its counterparts in Nigeria to develop and support a strategy for tackling drivers of violence in a way that simultaneously mitigates their effects. The U.S. should structure its financial assistance to reinforce this strategy.
- 2. Encourage Nigerian government counterparts to maintain space for local and international civil society, NGOs, and religious groups to adapt and respond to local conflict dynamics.** The independence of these organizations is paramount to their success as implementers. The Government of Nigeria should play a supportive role that is not unduly burdensome to these organizations as they carry out essential humanitarian and peacebuilding operations.
- 3. Promote and resource community-led, "people-to-people" approaches as a sustainable and cost-effective method for mitigating conflict.** The U.S. can actively support and resource mechanisms that are already effectively functioning to mitigate violence. For instance, Search's Early Warning/Early Response programs build platforms to report grievances, identify community-specific security threats, and agree on appropriate responses in partnership with communities, government, and security actors. There is a need to work within communities that are already experiencing violence and to prepare new communities, such as those in the Niger Delta, to cope with new migrations of pastoralists and handle disputes non-violently. The U.S. Congress should fully resource the funding streams through USAID and the State Department, such as the Complex Crises Fund, Conflict Mitigation and Management, and Human Rights Defense Fund, that supply organizations with needed resources to address the underlying drivers of conflict and build sustainable solutions.
- 4. Invest in sustainable agricultural and livestock production initiatives to spark employment, promote shared interests between farmers and herders, and build livelihoods.** Technological innovations and investment in agricultural development, value chain infrastructure, and renewable energy can help address the underlying environmental and economic drivers of conflict. The U.S. can recommit and reengage to the Agricultural Cooperation Agreement with Nigeria to sustainably modernize agricultural and animal production to help build community resilience to shocks.

I remain committed to working toward a sustainable solution to farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria that responds to the root causes and builds tolerance and understanding. I look forward to working with the U.S. government, international partners, our local partners in Nigeria, and communities across Nigeria to prevent violence and promote a peaceful future.

ⁱ "Analysis – A Look at Nigeria's Security Situation." *SB Morgen Intelligence*, 16 Dec. 2016, sbmintel.com/2017/01/17/analysis-a-look-at-nigerias-security-situation/.

ⁱⁱ "Weekly Context Update: May 5-11, 2017." *Search for Common Ground*. 12 May 2017.