



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
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**Remarks for USCIRF Vice-Chair Kristina Arriaga at the
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing:
“Nigeria: Elections and Human Rights”**

Thursday, December 6, 2018
2:30 – 3:30 PM
2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Good afternoon distinguished members and guests of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is honored to participate in this briefing and to share our findings on religious freedom conditions in Nigeria. Thank you to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (TLHRC), including the co-chairs, Representatives Hultgren and McGovern, for hosting today’s event. And thank you to all of those in attendance for joining in this important discussion.

Overview

USCIRF is a bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). Our mandate is to monitor religious freedom worldwide, using international standards as our measure, and to make independent policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress. Our work is led by nine private sector Commissioners, appointed by the White House and Congress, and supported by a full-time staff of about 20 people. Over the past 20 years of our work, we have seen a strong correlation between religious freedom, social stability, security, development, and the consolidation of democracy. Conversely, the lack of religious freedom correlates with instability, insecurity, extremism, and a host of other social and political problems.

Last month I traveled with USCIRF staff across Nigeria to assess the status of freedom of religion or belief in the country. We were fortunate to hear directly from religious leaders, civil society organizations, community elders and youth, government and security officials, human rights activists, and inspiring entrepreneurs. They are concerned with the ongoing conflicts around the country, in particular by how they inhibit civilians’ ability to freely and safely practice their religion or belief. They are also hopeful for the general elections planned for February 2019, and asking for greater U.S. attention and support as this crucial democratic transition approaches.

Religion is deeply embedded into Nigerian society, and a daily driver of perceptions and actions. Communities are strongly united by their religious and ethnic identities. Religious leaders wield

particularly important influence on their faith communities as well as on politics and general public discourse. While in many areas religious communities coexist harmoniously, in others there is repression and violence based on religious identity that is either tolerated or perpetrated by the government. Since 2009, USCIRF has recommended that the Secretary of State designate Nigeria as a “country of particular concern” or CPC, for engaging in or tolerating ongoing, systematic, and egregious violations of religious freedom. These include the insurgency by Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa, government repression of the Shi’a Muslim group the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), ongoing sectarian violence between religious communities, and state and societal marginalization of individuals based on their religion or belief. Designating Nigeria a CPC would enable the U.S. to take greater action – in partnership with Nigeria – to promote reforms to improve conditions for religious freedom.

Extremism, Repression, and Ongoing Sectarian Violence

Boko Haram remains a violent threat to Nigerians in the northeast and throughout the Lake Chad Basin. The ISIS-West Africa faction has reportedly conducted several major attacks against the Nigerian military this year, and has abducted and killed individuals both indiscriminately as well as for their beliefs. The Nigerian military has had an ongoing and heavy military response to these actors, and with the help of regional security coordination has been able to diminish their territorial control, which was primarily held during 2013-2014. In March 2018, Boko Haram was designated by the Secretary of State as an Entity of Particular Concern (EPC) under IRFA. It had been previously designated by the State Department as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in 2013. In February 2018, ISIS-West Africa was designated as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs) and as an FTO by the Department of State. According to [recent estimates](#) from the UN Refugee Agency, over 228,000 Nigerians are refugees and over 1.9 million people have been internally displaced in Nigeria because of this crisis.

The majority of Nigerian Muslims are Sunni, but there are three known Shi’a sects in the country as well. The Nigerian government and army continue to repress the IMN, one of the largest Shi’a organizations that varying estimates say represents between three to five million members. The IMN’s activities, including religious processions, continue to be banned or restricted in several states including Kaduna. Furthermore, police have repeatedly used excessive force to crackdown on the group. There still has been no justice for the over 300 IMN members killed by the army in 2015 in Zaria. The leader of the IMN, Sheikh Ibrahim El Zakzaky, as well as hundreds of members have been arrested and continue to be detained. Again, more recently, between October 28 and November 1, 2018, Shi’a Muslims marched across multiple cities for an annual religious procession and in protest for the release of their leader. Human rights organizations informed USCIRF about the violent crackdown on this occasion and their attempts to document the fatalities. At least [45 people were reportedly killed](#) and 122 injured. The Nigerian government has not made a public statement about this incident, and people have low expectations that there will be any accountability for this recent violence.

Severe and ongoing sectarian violence continues on a regular basis in states across the Middle Belt region. This violence and hostility between groups has increased significantly in the past year, and thousands of Nigerians remain displaced after having their villages completely destroyed in past attacks. In some areas this conflict manifests particularly as Muslims vs.

Christians, and often it is between groups divided along ethnic lines such as Hausa vs. Fulani. Conflict is generally driven by people's struggle to access resources and maintain livelihoods – farmlands have been destroyed in this “food basket” of Nigeria, and cattle is regularly stolen from cattle herders. However, religious polarization can easily escalate conflict and motivate reprisal attacks that target the “enemy” religious community. This conflict has persisted for decades with inadequate attention or solutions from the Nigerian government. The Nigerian government has also been unable to address the religious dimensions of these conflicts at the local level. Conspiracy theories and polarizing narratives continue to divide people along religious lines.

Impunity and Lack of Adequate Government Response

Furthermore, the key concern for many Nigerians we met with is impunity. When violence does occur between communities there are rarely adequate investigations conducted or arrests made. Often the same vigilante or militia groups are perpetrating revenge attacks or other criminal activity with no fear of punishment by the state. The rule of law is weak, police are too few and lack capacity, and challenges persist with security governance. Security officials have minimized the problem and claimed that things are improving, when sadly, they remain the same.

In Nigeria, data collection is extremely limited, and there are often disputes between communities and police as to the number of fatalities resulting from a violent incident. Figures reported by police often differ dramatically from those reported by religious communities or journalists. Difficulties with data collection are a key problem for non-governmental organizations, religious communities, police, and others working to find solutions to the sectarian divides and to prevent further violence. Population statistics are also highly sensitive and disputed. Nigeria is estimated to have a population of around half Muslims and half Christians. But there are also animists, atheists, Baha'is, and a range of other belief systems less often discussed in Western reporting.

Ongoing Discrimination and Implications of the 2019 Presidential Elections

On the state level, USCIRF continues to hear reports of the marginalization of individuals based on their religion or beliefs. Christians reported that in the north they are denied opportunities to attend university or to purchase property and obtain registration permits to build churches. Atheists and humanists have reported marginalization as well; in the north some fear being deemed apostates for sharing their beliefs. Muslims reported anti-Muslim sentiment in the south, including job discrimination. There are also regulations on religious activities and preaching in several states which religious leaders and community members alike have reported to be arbitrary or overly harsh. This month, USCIRF is also beginning a new research project to study the implementation of Islamic law in northern states, to learn how its application has impacted freedom of religion or belief.

Many Nigerians are worried that there will be continued violence ahead of the 2019 elections, and that it will fuel further crimes targeting various ethnic and religious communities. The Middle Belt is a particularly important region, seen as the convergence of the predominately Muslim north and Christian south and “swing states” in elections. Just as in past years, religious

leaders and other elites are using their platforms to encourage Nigerians to vote, and often for a particular candidate, which highlights the ongoing religious divides. As the United States is a close partner to Nigeria, we must remain committed to supporting Nigeria during this important time. We must also not neglect the religious sources of conflict and ensure we address the rhetoric and violence that persists. Although there are serious and legitimate concerns, we also have good reason to be optimistic. Nigerians' commitment to democracy, free and fair elections is steadfast and hopeful. Civil society is incredibly strong, resilient, and hard at work building peace around the country.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

Each year, USCIRF publishes an annual report on violations of religious freedom around the world and recommendations for U.S. policy. We encourage everyone from local actors to members of the diaspora in the United States to share with us their experiences and data on freedom of religion or belief so that we can continue to present a comprehensive picture of the issues and what can be done to address them.

Let me close by sharing some of our 2018 recommendations for Nigeria. The U.S. government should:

- Designate Nigeria as a CPC under IRFA;
- Seek to enter into a binding agreement with the Nigerian government, as authorized under section 405 (c) of IRFA, and provide associated financial and technical support, to obligate the Nigerian government to take substantial steps to address violations of religious freedom, including but not limited to:
 - Professionalize and train specialized police and joint security units to respond to sectarian violence and acts of terrorism, including in counterterrorism, investigative techniques, community policing, nonlethal crowd control, and conflict prevention methods;
 - Enhance training for all military and police officers on international human rights standards, and ensure security officers accused of excessive use of force and other human rights abuses are investigated and held accountable;
 - Conduct professional and thorough investigations of and prosecute incidents of sectarian violence and terrorism and suspected and/or accused perpetrators;
 - Develop effective conflict prevention and early warning mechanisms at the local, state, and federal levels using practical and implementable criteria;
 - Encourage politicians and religious leaders to participate in conflict management training and projects to prevent violence and counter divisive and inciting messages;
 - Advise and support the Nigerian government in the development of counter- and deradicalization programs;
- Hold a session of the U.S.-Nigeria Bi-National Commission to discuss further actions to end sectarian violence, address land concerns, hold perpetrators accountable, and reconcile communities;
- Within existing U.S. assistance to Nigeria, increase funding and support for conflict prevention and management programming in central and northern states facing high

levels of sectarian violence, and for research into the relationship between corruption and religious freedom violations in Nigeria; and

- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the “specially designated nationals” list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act.