

NIGERIA: CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE BELT

HEARING

BEFORE THE

TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

SEPTEMBER 27, 2017

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NIGERIA: CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE BELT

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2017

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION,
Washington, D.C.

The Commission met, pursuant to call, at 2:00 p.m., in Room 2255, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Randy Hultgren [co chairman of the Commission] presiding.

Mr. HULTGREN: It is 2 o'clock. I think we will still have some more people coming in, but we want to go ahead and get started. We know you all are busy people, many things going, but, again, grateful that you are here. So let's go ahead and start our hearing.

Good afternoon, and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's hearing on the ongoing intercommunal 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 clash between predominantly Muslim cattle herding nomadic groups and mostly Christian settled farming populations in Nigeria's Middle Belt is not new. However, around 3 years ago, there was a massive uptick in violence, and the death toll went from a few dozen to be measured now in the hundreds or even thousands. One estimate shows that there were 2,500 deaths in the Middle Belt just in 2016, and that does not convey the amount of injuries, loss of property, and rising insecurity.

Unlike the better known Boko Haram insurgencies in northern Nigeria, this conflict is not directed by a single organized militant group motivated by extremist ideologies. 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 proportion, has a 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 reasons to be proud of the increasing resilience and 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 the 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.

With that, I recognize Co Chairman McGovern.

[The prepared statement of Co-chair Hultgren follows]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE RANDY HULTGREN, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF ILLINOIS AND CO-CHAIRMAN OF THE TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

**TLHRC Hearing – Nigeria: Conflict in the Middle Belt
2255 Rayburn**

Introductory Remarks of the Honorable Randy Hultgren (IL-14) | September 27, 2017

- 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.

Mr. McGOVERN: Well, good afternoon, everyone. And I am happy to join my colleague, Co Chair Randy Hultgren, in welcoming all of you to this Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on conflict in the Middle Belt of Nigeria.

And I also want to add my sincere thanks to our witnesses for joining us here today. We appreciate your presence, we appreciate your knowledge, and we appreciate your commitment to ending armed conflicts around the world.

As many of you know, one of my focuses over the years in Congress has been on the issue of hunger and how we end hunger here at home and around the world. I believe that access to adequate food is a fundamental 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 access to a good, nutritious meal each and every day, hopefully more than one meal.

But when I talk about this issue, I usually couch it in terms that are a little bit different. I say that hunger, you know, is something that doesn't just occur naturally; it is essentially a political condition. And it happens when governance fails, when shared resources become impossible, when people who are in positions of power and authority don't come together and want to solve it.

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 eliminating 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.

And 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 am I pronouncing that correctly?

Ms. ONUBOGU: Yobe.

Mr. McGOVERN: Good. Yobe. I am from Massachusetts. I don't pronounce anything correctly.

So are part of the Lake Chad Basin. And 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 the 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.

But today we are 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 is 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.

So, as we will hear, these intercommunal conflicts have been going on 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 is 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 that they will offer us some 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 have seen ISIS and others do. So I am proud that the United States 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 fiscal year 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 is a new crisis on the horizon every day.

So 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, then surely we can figure out a way to transform them.

So I thank you for being here, and I yield back my time.

[The prepared statement of Mr. McGovern follows]

**PREPARED STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE JAMES P. McGOVERN, A
REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF
MASSACHUSETTS AND CO-CHAIRMAN OF THE TOM LANTOS HUMAN
RIGHTS COMMISSION**



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.

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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.

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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.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you to Co Chairman McGovern.

And, again, I want to thank our panelists for being here today. We have a very distinguished panel. And I am greatly looking forward to hearing from you your perspective and your suggestions and recommendations that we can bring to our colleagues as well.

I am going to introduce them and then have you each present, and then we will move to questions if that is all right.

So, grateful Dr. E.J. Hogendoorn is here. He is the Africa deputy program director for the International Crisis Group.

Also, Ms. Oge Onubogu is Senior Program Officer for Africa in the Middle East and Africa Center at the U.S. Institute of Peace.

Welcome. Glad you are here.

Mr. McGOVERN: Are we pronouncing that right? Because he is from the Midwest. His accent is worse than mine.

Mr. HULTGREN: You have to teach us, before we leave today, to say your names perfectly. So that is our goal. And hopefully we will learn a lot of other things, too, on how we can help Nigeria.

So, also, Ms. Olubukola Ademola Adelehin, I am sorry, is a conflict analyst at Search for Common Ground, the world's largest dedicated peace building organization. Welcome. Glad you are here.

And then, also, Dr. Elijah Brown is executive vice president of the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative, a Christian human rights organization working to empower a global movement to advance religious freedom.

And grateful that you are here as well.

So thank you all. With that, I would ask if each of you would present your testimony, and then we will move to questions.

STATEMENTS OF E.J. HOGENDOORN, DEPUTY PROGRAM DIRECTOR, AFRICA, INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP; OGE ONUBOGU, SENIOR PROGRAM OFFICER FOR AFRICA PROGRAMS, UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE; OLUBUKOLA ADEMOLA ADELEHIN, CONFLICT

ANALYST, NIGERIA, SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND; AND ELIJAH BROWN, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, 21ST CENTURY WILBERFORCE INITIATIVE

STATEMENT OF E.J. HOGENDOORN, DEPUTY PROGRAM DIRECTOR, AFRICA, INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

Mr. HOGENDOORN: Well, thank you very much, Representative McGovern and Representative Hultgren, for inviting Crisis Group to testify.

Crisis Group has been working on Nigeria since 2006, most recently focusing on the conflict with Boko Haram but also looking at other challenges that Nigeria is facing. Our most recent publication, published in September, was "Herders Against Farmers: Nigeria's Expanding Deadly Conflict," and copies are available at the table in the room.

As you know, violent conflict between herders and farmers has been escalating in the recent past. Some 2,500 people have died in 2016 and are destabilizing much of Nigeria. Unfortunately, the response from both the federal and state governments has been poor. President Buhari's administration and state governments need to work together to: one, shore up security for both herders and farmers; two, strengthen conflict resolution mechanisms at the local level; and, three, reform livestock management practices that have existed in Nigeria.

Crisis Group has been conducting fieldwork in farmer herder conflicts for over a year, and that has fed into our report that I just mentioned. Historically, relations between farmers and herders have been relatively harmonious, but that has changed over the last decade.

The sources of the conflict are both complex and multifaceted, but, in our view, they are not primarily religious. The situation, also, I should add, is not unique to Nigeria but is occurring all through Africa's Sahelian Belt, where these communities normally have resided and lived. And I should add that this is also somewhat similar to the range wars that the United States' West experienced during the late 1980s or, I am sorry, 1800s. Cliven Bundy I will set aside.

For my testimony, I would like to focus on four drivers of farmer herder conflicts. First, draught, desertification, and loss of grazing land. The north, as you know, is semi arid, and since the 1950s, 350,000 square kilometers, an area approximately the size of Montana, has turned to desert in Nigeria.

Also, population pressures are putting enormous pressure on herders. In the 1950s, Nigeria's population was 30 million. Today, it is closer to 190 million.

Furthermore, urban encroachment, the increase of farmland, irrigation farming, and, conversely, the loss of wetlands have all reduced the amount of land that is available

for pasturage and has driven lots of farmers further south into the central and southern belts of Nigeria.

Another serious issue that you mentioned in your opening remarks is rural banditry and the Boko Haram insurgency. Crime has increased significantly in rural northern Nigeria. For example, in 2013, some 64,000 cattle were stolen by cattle rustlers from herders. This has led to the increased prevalence of vigilante groups that are there to protect farmers, but, also, conversely, they increase insecurity for herders when they come into conflict.

These conflicts are made more deadly by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons throughout West Africa.

And last but not least, the Boko Haram insurgency has destabilized nearly a third of northern Nigeria. It has, again, reduced the amount of pasturage available to herders in the north and has led to significant losses for these people. It is estimated that in Borno State alone more than a million cattle were lost by herders during the insurgency.

Another important factor is the erosion of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. Unfortunately, the authority of traditional leaders has waned, while modern police and justice mechanisms have not been able to fill that gap. So, instead, what we are seeing is lots of communities taking the law into their own hand and oftentimes also reverting to revenge attacks when injustices occur.

Last but not least, what we are seeing is many unscrupulous leaders playing the communal card. Unfortunately, ethnicity and religion are important sources of identity and political mobilization in Nigeria. As you have mentioned, herders are mostly Fulani, primarily Muslim, and they are scattered throughout West Africa, but they have a long history in northern Nigeria. The south's majority Christian communities resent the herders' influx into their areas, and that has led to conflict both in the central and southern belts of Nigeria.

Unfortunately, these conflicts are also leading to many unfounded conspiracy theories that this is part of an attempt to Islamize Nigeria. That is abetted by a perception that President Buhari is biased towards Fulani because of his background as a pastoralist. As you have mentioned, unfortunately, the Nigerian response has been insufficient. President Goodluck Jonathan actually allocated \$317 million in an effort to try to reestablish some of the grazing territory that had been lost. Unfortunately, that money was stolen, and none of the officials were held accountable.

President Buhari has proposed a number of policies to try to address the root causes of these problems, but that has been stymied by politics both at the federal and state level. The federal police and the civilian defense corps are overstretched and lack the equipment to adequately secure rural areas.

State governments, instead, have adopted different policies to try to address some of these conflicts. Some have very usefully established peace committees to try to address these local conflicts. Others, however, have tried to regulate grazing, which is unpopular to pastoralists. Some have even gone to the extent of expelling herders from their territory. And, most worrisome, some have started supporting vigilante groups in an effort to protect farming communities. This, of course, could make the situation much, much worse.

We believe there are five steps that the Nigerian Government could do to help lessen the conflict.

One, improve security both for farmers and herders. They should act against cattle rustlers and particularly these systemic groups that are engaged in large scale theft. They should help track cattle so that it makes it more difficult for these cattle to be stolen from pastoralists. They should deploy more and better equipped police into rural areas, particularly in Kaduna and Benue States, which is where the situation is currently the worst. And they should invest in community liaisons so that they can get better intelligence and early warning on conflicts so as to prevent their escalation.

Secondly, as I have mentioned, I think the Nigerian Government should do much more to support community based conflict resolution. This could help manage conflicts between communities and help them discuss threats to their livelihoods and help to explore ways for them to coexist as they have in the past.

Three, the government should help establish grazing reserves and also encourage ranching. We should recognize that there needs to be a phased transition from open grazing to ranching. At the same time, we should also recognize that this could have significant impact on the livelihood of herders and that they need to be helped in terms of finding other ways of sustaining themselves and their family.

Fourth, more effort should be expended on trying to combat desertification and the environmental degradation of pastureland, particularly in the north but other parts of Nigeria as well.

And fifth but not least, there should be strengthened regional cooperation to manage human and cattle movements, as well as combating small arms and light weapons proliferation.

With that, I thank you for your attention to this important topic, and I look forward to answering your questions at the appropriate time. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Hogendoorn follows]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF E.J. HOGENDOORN

Testimony of EJ Hogendoorn
Deputy Program Director, Africa, International Crisis Group
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
27 September 2017
“Nigeria: Conflict in the Middle Belt”

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Co-Chairs of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, Rep. James P. McGovern and Rep. Randy M. Hultgren for inviting Crisis Group to testify today on Nigeria: Conflict in the Middle Belt. Crisis Group has been producing reports on Nigeria since 2006, most recently focusing on the Boko Haram insurgency in the north east, but also periodically writing about the country’s other security challenges. Our latest publication is *Herders against Farmers: Nigeria’s Expanding Deadly Conflict* (19 September 2017), which like all our reports is available for free on our website.

Nigeria’s Spreading Farmer-Herder Conflicts

Violent conflicts between pastoralists and sedentary agrarian communities in Nigeria’s central and southern zones have escalated in recent years and are spreading southward, threatening the country’s security and stability. Some 2,500 people reportedly died in these clashes in 2016, and they are becoming as dangerous as the Boko Haram insurgency in the north east. Yet to date, the federal and state level responses have been poor. President Muhammadu Buhari’s administration and affected state governments need to work together, taking immediate steps to shore up security for herders and farmers, strengthening conflict-resolution mechanisms and initiating longer-term efforts to reform livestock management practices, address negative environmental trends and curb cross-border movements of both cattle rustlers and armed herders.

A. Drivers of violence

Historically, relations between herders and sedentary farming communities have been relatively harmonious. By and large, they lived in a peaceful, symbiotic relationship: herders’ cattle would fertilise the farmers’ land in exchange for grazing rights. But tensions have grown over the past decade, with increasingly violent flare-ups spreading throughout central and southern states; incidents have occurred in at least 22 of the country’s 36 states.

Contrary to many simplistic media accounts, the sources of the conflicts are complex and multifaceted, and are not primarily religious in nature. These causes include drought and desertification; loss of grazing reserves; changing livelihood practices; rural banditry and cattle rustling; conflicts in the North, such as the Boko Haram insurgency; the erosion of

traditional authority and conflict mediation mechanisms; as well as leaders playing the communal card.

Drought, desertification and loss of grazing land

Nigeria's far north is arid and semi-arid, and becoming dryer. Since the 1950s, over 350,000 sq km of the already arid region turned to desert or desert-like conditions, a phenomenon progressing southward at the rate of 0.6km per year. These environmental changes have wrecked agriculture and human livelihoods, forcing millions of pastoralists and others to migrate south, in search of productive land. Over the last two decades, however, as available pastures shrank, northern herders have been staying in the central zone longer. More recently, some have chosen to graze their herds there permanently. This has triggered increasing disputes over land and water use with growing populations of sedentary crop farmers.

At the same time, much grazing land set aside by the government in the 1960s has been taken by small scale settlers and private commercial interests. This also is forcing herders to seek pasture elsewhere.

Last, but not least, crop farmers, with federal government help, have expanded into previously uncultivated land. Water pumps have helped farmers exploit wetlands (river valleys and flood plains) for dry season irrigated agriculture. Herders lost access to these grass-abundant wetlands, which they had previously used with little risk of livestock straying into farms. In this changed environment, relations became more competitive and confrontational, especially in the absence of negotiations between farmers and herders to ensure access to grazing grounds and livestock routes.

Rural Banditry, Cattle Rustling and Escalating Conflict in the North

Rural banditry and conflict also are driving herders south. Over the last decade, cattle rustling has grown in scale and organisation in several northern states where large bandit groups operate with mounting audacity. One report estimated that in 2013 more than 64,000 cattle were stolen and almost 3,000 herders killed in states across the north-central zone. Vigilante groups formed to combat bandits have triggered retaliatory violence. Elsewhere, vigilantes have turned into predators themselves, extorting cash and cattle from herders for "protection". Conflict has grown more deadly by the ready availability of small arms and light weapons that have proliferated in West Africa.

The Boko Haram insurgency, in Nigeria's north east (and spreading from there into the entire Lake Chad basin) is another major threat to herders. According to the local cattle

breeders' association, the group has stolen more than one million cattle in Nigeria's northeastern Borno state alone. Unable to safely graze their cattle in the north east, herders have moved farther south, further increasing competition for land in the country's Middle Belt.

Erosion of Traditional Mechanisms

All this conflict is occurring as traditional authority wanes. Customarily disputes over wandering stock or damaged crops typically were resolved by village chiefs and herders' leaders. This system started crumbling in the 1970s, undermined by the involvement of the police and courts. Furthermore, local political leaders have tended to favour farmers over itinerant herders, who may not be around at election time. Consequently, herders feel increasingly marginalised and are largely distrustful of local political leaders as conflict mediators. Furthermore, over time, both herders and farmers have lost confidence in the ability of authorities to mediate and conciliate. Aggrieved parties have turned to violence to seek redress or revenge.

Playing the Communal Card

In Nigeria region, ethnicity and religion are important sources of identity. Ethnicity, which is often linked to a specific faith, is particularly important because some communities have rights as indigenes of particular states that more recent immigrants, "setters", do not. Nigerian herders are mostly Fulani (also known as Fulbe and Peul), a primarily Muslim people estimated to number some 20-25 million, scattered through much of West Africa. The south's majority Christian communities resent the influx of herders, portrayed in some narratives as an "Islamisation force".

The conflicts have spawned dangerous political and religious conspiracy theories. One is that herder attacks are part of a longer-term Fulani plot to displace indigenous populations and seize their lands. In March 2016, the prelate of the Methodist Church of Nigeria, Dr Samuel Uche, said: "We are aware there is a game plan to Islamize Nigeria, and they are using the Fulani herdsmen to initiate it". In the south east, Biafra separatist groups describe the attacks as part of a northern plot to overwhelm the peoples of the south and forcefully convert. Some southerners accuse President Buhari, who has a pastoral Fulani background, of deliberately failing to stop herder aggression. These charges are not supported by any solid evidence, but they are aggravating inter-faith distrust and undermining the country's fragile unity.

B. Insufficient Responses

The federal and local governments have, over the years, explored various responses, but with little if any positive effect.

In 2014, then-President Goodluck Jonathan's administration allocated \$317 million to recover and improve grazing routes lost to farmer encroachment, but to little effect. It appears that most of the money has been misappropriated. A proposal by current President Buhari to formulate a comprehensive livestock development plan has been stymied by opposition from southern politicians who feel it favoured herders. The parliament introduced three bills to address the conflicts' root causes, but all languished, in part due to disputes about federal versus states jurisdiction.

The federal police and Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps are spread too thin and lack adequate equipment. Herders say they sometimes have to seek revenge because security forces take no action against attackers who kill them and steal their cattle. Farmers say the agencies' failure to respond promptly to distress calls and punish aggressors emboldens the herders. Often, the country's dysfunctional law enforcement and criminal justice system fails to arrest or prosecute any perpetrators of violence. Moreover, authorities have generally treated these crimes as political rather than criminal acts, arguing that punishing suspects could spark further violence.

State governments have pursued different policies. Several have established state and local peace commissions or committees to promote herder-farmer dialogue and resolve conflicts. Others, have passed laws regulating grazing. Herders, who consider these regulations restrictive, often fail to comply.

In several instances authorities occasionally have expelled herder groups from specific areas, following local protests. More troubling still, the governor of Abia state, Okezie Ikpeazu, revived a local vigilante outfit popularly known as the Bakassi Boys. The Cross River state government also said it would set up a 3,000-member "Homeland Security Service".

These measures may have reduced clashes in some area, but in others they have made the situation worse. The expulsion of herder groups has only deepened their resentment. If vigilante groups attack herders in the south, herders might take revenge against southerners residing in the north, thereby further widening the conflict.

Five Steps to Help Address the Conflict

1. **Improve Security for Herders and Farmers:** At a minimum, the federal government and its security agencies should intensify operations against cattle rustlers, improving systems to track livestock movement and trade, arresting individuals who carry illegal firearms and prosecuting suspected assailants. It should deploy more and better-equipped police units in rural and forested areas where bandits are based. Police should also do more to stop attacks on farming communities, particularly in badly affected southern Kaduna and Benue states. To make operations more efficient, they should invest more in community liaison

mechanism to upgrade intelligence gathering, early warning and rapid response.

2. Support Community-based Conflict Resolution: Wherever possible, state and local governments should support or establish local and community-based dispute resolution mechanisms. Forums that allow various constituencies – farmers, pastoralists, community vigilantes and state security agencies – to monitor, identify, discuss and manage potential threats can be particularly helpful. These also can be used to help farmers and pastoralists explore mutually beneficial ways to coexist.

3. Establish Grazing Reserves and Encourage Ranching: The federal government, working with state governments, should officially document existing grazing reserves that have not been over-run by human settlements and follow through on its plan to establish new grazing reserves in the ten northern states. In the longer term, because of limited land and growing populations, it will be necessary to shift many herders from open grazing to ranching. However, states should encourage a phased transition to ranching, rather than prohibiting open grazing as some have done. Furthermore, federal and state governments also need to work out alternative plans for the large numbers of herders who may lose their livelihoods in the transition from open grazing to ranching.

4. Combat Desertification: The Nigerian government and donors should support efforts to prevent desertification and restore environmentally degraded lands. In the same spirit, the federal government should develop strategies for mitigating the impact of climate change, managing environmentally-induced migration, preventing conflicts over use of land and other natural resources – and implement them.

5. Strengthen Regional Cooperation: States throughout the Sahel should work together to manage human and cattle movements across borders and to fight illicit arms trafficking.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you.

Next, Ms. Onubogu.

**STATEMENT OF OGE ONUBOGU, SENIOR PROGRAM OFFICER FOR
AFRICA PROGRAMS, UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE**

Ms. ONUBOGU: Congressman Hultgren, Congressman McGovern, thank you for convening this hearing today on Nigeria and for the opportunity to testify before the Commission today. The views I express here today are my own and do not represent those of the U.S. Institute of Peace.

It is an honor to appear before you today and to be joined in the audience by a group of influential civic and religious Nigerian leaders who are working in partnership with the U.S. Institute of Peace to find lasting resolution to violent conflicts in the country. They have come together to form a senior working group, and one of the group's current efforts is to assist the Nigerian Government in addressing root causes of the Boko Haram insurgency and other unrest in the country, including deadly clashes between herders and farmers.

I want to thank you for organizing this hearing on this important and underreported conflict that now threatens to undermine the gains for the U.S. Nigeria partnerships and investments over the years in reducing violent conflict in Africa's most populous country.

Tensions between nomadic cattle herders and more settled farming communities have a long history in Nigeria's north and along the country's Middle Belt. In recent years, what were once low level clashes mostly confined to these areas have spiraled into a deadly crisis that is inflaming religious as well as ethnic hostilities locally and nationally.

The frequency and intensity of these clashes have increased. Although the Boko Haram insurgency is still a threat, more casualties last year were tied to pastoral conflicts than to the extremist group. This conflict over land and natural resources has drawn little notice internationally and urgently needs more attention from Nigeria's federal government.

Ultimately, these conflicts between farmers and herders are entirely predictable and can be prevented. The trajectory of this crisis has been documented by many scholars who have followed the history of the conflict in Nigeria in recent times. The geography of the violence can be traced and its direction can be anticipated if the appropriate government security agencies have effective early warning systems and rapid response mechanisms.

The trends and drivers of the conflict are also well documented. Within Nigeria, population growth and expansion of farms have blocked traditional grazing routes used by herders moving south as the Sahara Desert advances into northern Nigeria. Corrupt politicians have also grabbed choice pieces of land. Environmental change in neighboring countries, such as the shrinkage of Lake Chad, has sparked an influx of foreign herders, whose lack of familiarity with Nigerian populations often sparks violent misunderstandings.

The crisis is also fueled by other conflicts in the Lake Chad Basin and Sahel region that has forced many nomadic cattle herding populations to flee areas of conflict in Mali and Niger, where perennial conflict has made it difficult for them to freely graze their cattle.

Given these dynamics and trends, coordinated efforts are required at the local, state, national, and regional levels to bring an end to this violence.

The senior working group here present today recently conducted focus group discussions to understand the current trends of farmer herder conflicts in Plateau State in the Middle Belt. These discussions revealed that, while some early warning systems supported by the state government and civil society organizations exist, the capacity of justice and security actors, including the police and the judiciary, to effectively utilize these systems to address early warning signs and respond to the conflict is limited.

In the absence of a well coordinated national response to this violence, it is up to the local and state governments to revive local mechanisms for conflict resolution so that conflicts are not allowed to escalate into catastrophic events. USIP citizen surveys conducted earlier this year in Plateau State and in Borno State in the northeast found that, in situations of conflict, citizens would prefer to first seek help and advice from their traditional and community leaders.

Strengthening coordination between local communities and state justice and security actors, including the police and the judiciary, can help state governments prioritize preventive measures. This coordination can be used to establish new or strengthen existing local peace building and reconciliation mechanisms, especially within rural communities and areas most affected by the conflict. These efforts should also be complemented by support to the state judiciary and the police actors to strengthen their capacity to prevent, respond, and prosecute violent conflict.

Pastoral conflicts in Nigeria today are perhaps the most extensive territorially, as they affect states in all six geopolitical zones of the country. This crisis has also provided a cover for other forms of criminal activities, such as cattle rustling, rural banditry, and kidnapping.

Viable solutions to farmer herder conflicts in the Middle Belt would require looking beyond the region to understand how this conflict manifests itself in other parts of Nigeria.

According to reports from local researchers in Nigeria, Zamfara State in the northwestern part of the country has recorded an equal, if not higher, number of casualties from pastoral conflicts. However, this conflict does not receive the same level of media coverage within Nigeria because it is predominantly a conflict between Muslim farmers and Muslim herders and does not fit into the prevailing local media stereotype of Christian Muslim conflict.

The fact that many farmer herder clashes in the Middle Belt are between predominantly Christian farming communities and mostly Muslim nomadic cattle herders exacerbates existing ethno religious hostilities. Given the historical deficit of trust between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, viewing the current farmer herder crisis in the Middle Belt as an ethno religious conflict that is distinct from other similar farmer herder attacks across the country inflames social tensions and overshadows critical discussion about the harmful impacts of this conflict on Nigeria's agricultural economy.

The combined effect of competition for land, crime, and poorly informed media speculations has resulted in a cycle of conflict with mass casualties suffered by both farmer and herder communities. Support for media training programs, in coordination with local communities and relevant state government agencies, can help to address the information gap in media coverage of the farmer herder conflicts.

Support to faith based communities, community networks, and civic organizations to develop balanced messaging about the crisis would help to shift the discussion from the identities and religious backgrounds of those involved in the conflict to focus more on identifying sustainable solutions to resolve the conflict.

A solution to the conflicts between farmers and herders in Nigeria cannot be found in isolation of the other countries in West Africa because pastoralists move across borders in the region. These pastoralists, who traditionally traveled without weapons, now resort to acquiring ammunition to protect their cattle from heavily armed and organized cattle rustling groups that roam across Nigeria's north.

A surge in cattle banditry has prompted herders who have never carried weapons before to arm themselves to protect their livelihoods. According to the Nigerian Government, 70 percent of the 500 million illegal small arms and light weapons in West Africa are in Nigeria.

The context that frames the conflict between nomadic cattle herders and farming communities is global in nature, and efforts to address these challenges should draw from existing regional and subregional frameworks to articulate a collective regional response to the problem.

At the subregional level, the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS, has provided frameworks to improve livestock mobility across the region, such as the ECOWAS Transhumance Protocol of 1998, which allows herders to move their cattle across borders if they fulfill the conditions of the protocol, which includes abiding by the laws of their host countries.

Although these regional frameworks may not necessarily address the uniqueness of the situation in Nigeria, they can provide useful reference points for resolving the conflict. Support to federal and regional agencies to review these existing frameworks can help inform steps towards dismantling the armed cattle rustling syndicates and tracking small arms and light weapons that have made their way into Nigeria through transnational crime networks spread across the Sahel.

In conclusion, recent episodes of farmer herder conflicts in Nigeria continue to suggest that the efforts of the federal government to address the conflict are inadequate. The growing assertiveness of some state governors to solve these intercommunal farmer herder clashes offers some cause for optimism and possible avenues for engagement.

USIP and the senior working group will be reviewing the role of the newly established state peace building institutions in Plateau and Kaduna States, both in the Middle Belt, to understand how these agencies can play a proactive role in monitoring violent conflict and preventing violence.

These initiatives by state governments may contain low level conflicts in some areas; however, without a coordinated state federal level effort, one that improves security, tackles corruption, and addresses the competition over natural resources, the violence already destabilizing parts of Africa's most populous country and second largest economy will only widen and intensify.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Onubogu follows]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF OGE ONUBOGU



United States Institute of Peace

Nigeria: Conflict in the Middle Belt

**Testimony before the Tom Lantos Human Rights
Commission**

**Ms. Oge Onubogu
Senior Program Officer for Africa
United States Institute of Peace
September 27, 2017**

Congressman Hultgren, Congressman McGovern, and members of the Commission, thank you for convening this hearing today on Nigeria and for the opportunity to testify. The views I express here are my own and do not represent those of the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP).

It is an honor to appear before you today and to be joined in the audience by a group of influential civic and religious Nigerian leaders who are working in partnership with the U.S. Institute of Peace to find a lasting resolution to violent conflicts in their country. They have come together to form a Senior Working Group and one of the group's current efforts is to assist Nigerian government officials in addressing the root causes of the Boko Haram insurgency and other unrest in Nigeria, including deadly clashes between herders and farmers.

I want to thank you for organizing this hearing on this important, but under-reported conflict that now threatens to undermine the gains from U.S.–Nigeria partnerships and investments over the years in reducing violent conflict in Africa's most populous country.

Tensions between nomadic cattle herders and more settled farming communities have a long history in Nigeria's north and along the country's Middle Belt. In recent years, what were once recurrent, low-level clashes mostly confined to these areas have spiraled into a deadly crisis that is inflaming religious as well as ethnic hostilities locally and nationally.

The frequency and intensity of these clashes has increased. Although the Boko Haram insurgency is still a threat, [more casualties last year](#) were tied to pastoral conflicts than to the extremist group—470 people were killed in cattle rustling incidents and 1,425 killed in clashes between farmers and herders. This conflict over land and natural resources has drawn little notice internationally and urgently needs more attention from Nigeria's federal government.

Ultimately, these conflicts between farmers and herders are entirely predictable and can be prevented. The trajectory of this crisis has been documented by many scholars who have followed the history of the conflict in Nigeria in recent times. The geography of the violence can be traced and its direction can be anticipated if the appropriate government security agencies have effective early warning and rapid response mechanisms.

The trends and drivers of the conflict are also well-documented. Within Nigeria, the population growth and the expansion of farms have blocked many traditional grazing routes used by herders moving south as the Sahara Desert advances in northern Nigeria. Corrupt politicians have grabbed choice pieces of land. Environmental change in neighboring countries, such as the shrinkage of Lake Chad, has sparked an influx of foreign herders whose lack of familiarity with Nigerian populations often sparks violent misunderstandings. The crisis is also fueled by other conflict in the Lake Chad Basin and Sahel regions that has forced many nomadic cattle herding populations to flee areas of Mali and Niger where perennial conflict has made it difficult for them to freely graze their cattle.

Given these dynamics and trends, coordinated efforts are required at the local, state, national, and regional levels to end this violence.

The Senior Working Group recently conducted focus group discussions to understand the current trends of farmer-herder conflicts in Plateau state. These discussions revealed that while some early warning systems supported by the state government and civil society organizations exist, the capacity of justice and security actors to effectively utilize these systems to address early warning signs and respond to violent conflict is limited. In the absence of a well-coordinated national response, it is up to the local and state governments to revive local mechanisms for conflict resolution so that conflicts are not allowed to escalate into catastrophic events. USIP citizen surveys conducted earlier this year in Plateau and Borno states found that in situations of conflict, citizens would prefer to first seek help and advice from their traditional or community leaders.

Strengthening coordination between local communities and state justice and security actors, including the police and judiciary, can help state governments prioritize preventive measures. This coordination can be used to establish new or strengthen existing local peacebuilding and reconciliation mechanisms, especially within rural communities in areas most affected by this conflict. These efforts should also be complemented by support to state justice and security actors to strengthen their capacity to prevent, respond, and prosecute violent conflict.

Pastoral conflicts in Nigeria today are perhaps the most extensive territorially, as they affect states in all six geo-political zones of the country. This crisis has also provided a cover for other forms of criminal activities such as cattle rustling, rural banditry, and kidnapping.

Viable solutions to farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle-Belt would require looking beyond the region to understand how this conflict manifests itself in other parts of the country.

According to reports from local researchers in Nigeria, Zamfara state in the North West has recorded an equal if not higher number of casualties from pastoral conflicts. However, this conflict does not receive the same level of media coverage within Nigeria because it is predominantly a conflict between Muslim farmers and herders, and does not fit into the prevailing local media stereotype of Christian-Muslim conflicts.

The fact that many farmer-herder clashes in the Middle-Belt are between predominantly Christian farming communities and mostly Muslim nomadic cattle herders exacerbates existing ethno-religious hostilities. Given the historical deficit of trust between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, viewing the current farmer-herder crisis in the Middle-Belt as an ethno-religious conflict that is distinct from other similar farmer-herder attacks across the

country inflames social tensions and overshadows critical discussion about the harmful impacts of this conflict on Nigeria's agricultural economy.

The combined effects of competition for land, crime, and poorly informed media speculations have resulted in a cycle of conflict with mass casualties suffered by both farmer and herder communities.

Support for media training programs in coordination with local communities and relevant state government agencies can help to address the information gaps in media coverage of the Farmer-herder conflicts. Support to faith-based communities, community networks, and civic actors to develop balanced messaging about the crisis would help to shift the discussion from the identities and religious backgrounds of those involved in the conflict to focus more on identifying sustainable solutions to resolve conflict.

A solution to the conflicts between farmers and herders in Nigeria cannot be found in isolation of other countries in West Africa because pastoralists move across borders in the region. These pastoralists, who traditionally traveled without weapons, now resort to acquiring ammunition to protect their cattle from heavily armed and organized cattle rustling groups that roam across Nigeria's north. A surge in cattle banditry has prompted herders who have never carried weapons before to arm themselves to protect their livelihoods. According to the Nigerian government, 70 percent of the 500 million illegal small arms and light weapons in West Africa are in Nigeria.

The context that frames the conflict between nomadic cattle herders and farming communities is global in nature, and efforts to address these challenges should draw from existing regional and sub-regional frameworks to articulate a collective regional response to the problem.

At the sub-regional level, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has provided frameworks to improve livestock mobility across the region, such as the ECOWAS Transhumance Protocol of 1998 which allows herders to move their cattle across borders if they fulfil the conditions of the protocol, which include abiding by the laws of their host countries. Although these regional frameworks may not necessarily address the uniqueness of the situation in Nigeria, they can provide useful reference points for resolving conflict. Support to federal and regional agencies to review these existing frameworks can help inform steps towards dismantling the armed cattle rustling syndicates and tracking small arms and light weapons that have made their way into Nigeria through transnational criminal networks spread across the Sahel region.

Recent episodes of farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria continue to suggest that efforts by the federal government to address the conflict are inadequate. The growing assertiveness of some state governors to solve these inter-communal farmer-herder clashes offers some cause for optimism and possible avenues to engagement. USIP and The Senior Working Group will be reviewing the role of the newly established state peacebuilding institutions in Plateau and Kaduna states to understand how these agencies can play a proactive role

in monitoring violent conflict and preventing violence. These initiatives by state governments may contain low-level conflicts in some areas. However, without a coordinated state-federal effort—one that improves security, tackles corruption, and addresses the competition over natural resources—the violence already destabilizing parts of Africa’s most populous country and second largest economy will only widen and intensify.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.

The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you, Ms. Onubogu.

Next, we recognize Ms. Ademola Adelehin. If you could give your testimony, please. Thank you.

STATEMENT OF OLUBUKOLA ADEMOLA ADELEHIN, CONFLICT ANALYST, NIGERIA, SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND

Ms. ADEMOLA ADELEHIN: Thank you very much, Co Chairmen Hultgren and McGovern, members of the Lantos Commission, and distinguished guests. It is an honor to be here today all the way from Abuja to join this critical conversation about the protracted violent conflicts involving farmers and herders in Nigeria.

I am a conflict analyst. I work with Search for Common Ground, one of the largest conflict transformation and peace building organizations in Nigeria and around the world. I have analyzed and walked these communities ravaged by farmer herder conflict in Nigeria for over a decade.

In my testimony, I list my experience and some of what Search is doing in the field, but my views are mine. And I would like to ask that my written testimony be entered into the record.

Mr. HULTGREN: That will be included. Thank you.

Ms. ADEMOLA ADELEHIN: Thank you.

I will just give you a brief personal experience, and I would like to also use this testimony to highlight four dynamics of the conflict. I will cite three examples of current efforts and opportunities, and I will also give four suggestions on how United States and our government can support Nigeria to address the root causes and the drivers of this conflict as well as mitigate and develop economic growth that is good for Nigeria and her partners.

My first experience in the impact of farmer herder conflict was in 2005 when I met a group of women in Jos, Plateau State, who had just experienced the brunt of farmer herder conflict. I listened to their harrowing tales of loss of family members, of injury, sexual violence, betrayal, displacement, and especially hopelessness and helplessness. But, nevertheless, they had started healing from their traumatic experience, and they also were optimistic about their contribution to bringing back peace to their communities, and that impacted me greatly.

Permit me to make five brief observations about some of the drivers of violent conflict. Some of the speakers already said some, so I will skip those ones.

Number one, there are social drivers. And this is the intrusion of ethno religious identities and interests in these farmer herder conflicts. And this basically is neither an ethnic conflict, neither is it a religious conflict, but a result of competition for resources, for arable land, for water points, and also which has led to a lot of violent reactions, and specifically issues of crop damages, attack on animals, which were in the early 1970s seen as accidental by both farmers and herders but, because of the alteration in their relationship, are being seen as deliberate and provocative; then this violent response.

There are economic drivers, which is the increased demand for cattle and also increase in the price of cattle. In the last two decades, at least 40 percent increase in the size of herds in Nigeria and about a 400 percent increase in the price of a cow in Nigeria. And this has led to increased interest in cattle industry, larger herds owned by wealthy individuals that are neither Fulanis but who have hired people to help them raise these animals, and also an increase in criminal activities, as already mentioned.

And the third factor is technological. Artificial fertilizers and other innovations have created incentives for farmers and herders not to even worry themselves about cultivating the harmonious relationship that they used to have. And, again, extensive deforestation and degradation has also continued to move herders from the cattle routes even as far as Central African Republic to farther Nigeria in the Niger Delta region, where we are recording violence.

And, again, the last one is the government's overreliance on a security response. And what this has done is that it has breached the trust between communities and these groups. And these military responses, most times they are either late or they are perceived as ineffective in addressing and apprehending offenders and prosecuting them. And, in some cases, even the military has been late or been culpable, even targeting civilians and other issues.

Now I would like to underscore three current efforts and opportunities to mitigate this violence.

First, civil society groups, including Search, are implementing community based peace and security initiatives for a more proactive response to farmer herder conflict in Nigeria. And through this platform that brings together traditional institutions, religious institutions, women's groups, youth groups, government institutions, a lot of efforts and successes have been recorded.

For example, just facilitated a situation where farmers and herders have agreed on actions to deescalate violence. And one of these is allowing at least 30 feet between the farm and the road to allow large herds to move without encroaching on farmlands, which has already deescalated a lot of conflict in that particular community in Nasarawa State. And, again, some media and community groups are also working to build trust and cultural understanding between the pastoralists and the farmers. A typical farmer does not fully understand the culture and identity of the Fulanis. Neither do the Fulanis fully

understand those ones of the Beroms, Anaguta, and Afizere in places like Plateau State. And what is fundamental is that not all Fulanis are herders, neither are all cattle owners Fulanis, but there is this demonization of the identity of Fulanis.

And beyond the discussions, there are other events for cultural understanding, cultural festivals, and also different things to further humanize the different identity that have been demonized and demonized to continue to perpetuate this so called violence.

Number three is investment in agriculture and cattle value chain development, which is a shared economic interest for peace and stability. The current rain fed, seasonal farming is not sufficient to sustain the agricultural practices of farmers. Neither is the movement of cattle from one point to the other in search of pastures and water points also sustainable, because research has shown that it reduces the quality and quantity of both the milk and the meat and is not viable for economic purposes.

And, again, already there are a few investments in agriculture and livestock value chain, but they are largely inadequate to meet the need and opportunity that is existing in this kind of investment. Also, by investing in agricultural development and improvement is also a way of encouraging and creating jobs and so on and so forth.

Finally, I would like to offer some recommendations to the U.S. Congress about how the United States can improve its relationship with Nigeria to address farmer herder conflicts.

Number one, the U.S. should support politically and financially the holistic and proactive strategies to address the root causes and drivers of violence in the herder farmer conflict in Nigeria, because the current government approach is largely reactive and unable to prevent violence or escalation and a reescalation of existing violent conflict.

And, secondly, the U.S. should technically support communities and also financially community led people to people approaches as a sustainable method for conflict transformation in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. There is a need for communities that largely experience this to better imbibe the way to react not violently. In the Middle Belt, there is some capacity built, but further south in Nigeria and in the Niger Delta, where more incidents are occurring, there is a need to invest in those areas.

Number three, investment in sustainable agricultural and livestock production initiatives should be prioritized. And this would generate employment for unemployed youths and unemployable youths that are causing this violence.

And, lastly, there is a need to encourage the Nigerian Government to maintain operational space for local and international civil society organizations, NGOs, religious bodies, to adapt and respond to local conflict dynamics. This government should play a supportive role in this.

I want to thank you again for having me here today, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Ademola Adelehin follows]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF OLUBUKOLA ADEMOLA ADELEHIN

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
United States House of Representatives

Hearing on
Nigeria: Conflict in the Middle Belt
September 27th, 2017 – 2:00 p.m.
2255 Rayburn House Office Building

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.¹ 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,

¹ "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/.

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 herdsman (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.²
- 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 herders, 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 herders. 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.

² "Weekly Context Update: May 5-11, 2017." *Search for Common Ground*. 12 May 2017.

- 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.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you, Ms. Ademola Adelehin.

Next, Dr. is it pronounced "Brown"? Sorry. Just kidding. I had to say that.

Mr. BROWN: Very good.

Mr. HULTGREN: I got one right. Thank you. Thank you for being here as well. So we will next recognize Dr. Brown.

STATEMENT OF ELIJAH BROWN, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, 21ST CENTURY WILBERFORCE INITIATIVE

Mr. BROWN: Well, it is an honor to participate in this important hearing. Thank you, Commission Co Chairs Hultgren and McGovern. Thank you, more broadly, to the distinguished members of this important commission and to the staff who have helped to make today possible.

And I stand with the other panelists in acknowledging that Nigeria is at a critical human rights juncture and that one of the primary drivers of forces threatening to fracture Nigeria is escalating conflict in the Middle Belt.

Perhaps the most severe example is one that just passed its year and a half anniversary with still none of the participants held accountable: the assault on Agatu. We were there in Nigeria when this assault occurred and, 5 days after the attack, interviewed Christian and Muslim survivors.

The attack on Agatu began on Monday, February 22, 2016, at some point after midday. Cell phone video obtained from a deceased assailant showed men getting ready to launch at least two flat bottom boats up the Benue River to begin this assault. The languages being spoken on the video include those prominent in Nigeria as well as some that are more common in neighboring countries.

The boats landed around 3 o'clock that afternoon. And according to an eyewitness who visited with us just days after the attack, the militants were about to shoot him when he began to shout that he was a Muslim. After proving that this was true, those who were attacking repositioned their attack, sparing that individual and that area. That evening, multiple eyewitnesses confirmed that a helicopter landed, resupplied the attackers so that the attack could continue on into a second day.

The United Nations claims that 10 Agatu villages were razed during that attack, that 300 were killed, and 20,000 displaced. It is a significant attack, involving a degree of planning, enlisting attackers from outside the country, launching from boats moving upriver in the middle of day, utilizing a helicopter at night to resupply, differentiating selection of targets on the basis of religion, retreating without interference, and, to date, no known arrests. All of this speaks to a growing level of military sophistication.

Now, this is not an isolated case. There are many examples throughout the Middle Belt of graphic violence, rapes, children cut down, intentional targeting of religious minorities, and entire communities burned to the ground and forced to the brink of famine.

As an organization, we visited some of these areas, including myself and Congressman Frank Wolf, who is known to many in this room. We visited these communities. We gathered in the shells of burned out churches, we stood in the remains of destroyed homes and listened to the stories of individuals who described repetitive attacks and a very uncertain path for rebuilding.

We visited with elders from very small, rural, grassroots communities. For example, one elder from Sho stood and, with tears coming down his face, began to beg for help, saying, "We are under siege, and we are surviving by eating grass." The name of the village in that local language means "peace." Peace is literally under siege in the Middle Belt.

The elders from Jol brought forward this written documentation, and it is just page after page after page of photographs showing more than 100 who have been killed, more than 10,000 who have been displaced, 360 homes destroyed, 1,400 hectares of crops ruined, and multiple hamlets destroyed all of it documented. The estimated impact in this one small, rural community is 1.9 million U.S. dollars.

And here is their worry and they are not alone in this concern that what is happening in some of these areas, certainly not all, but in some of these areas, are that attackers are destroying the outlying hamlets, they are illegally erecting new structures in that area, assigning that area a new name, and then publicly claiming the territory as their historic grazing reserve.

Tension and conflict, as has already been noted, have long existed, but since 2014 something different is happening: integrated attacks, supply helicopters, boat raids, foreign agents, machine guns mounted on vehicles, AK 47s, scorched earth policies, offensives that last sometimes for days, and very limited government interaction. Now, what label do you use to describe this since 2014? It is important. And we can have that debate. Some talk about "criminality." Some talk about "terrorism," even within Nigeria have used that terminology. We at the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative have been using the term "Fulani militants," in part to strongly affirm our belief that this is not the Fulani as a whole, many of whom do not participate in these acts of aggression,

maintain peaceful coexistence with local communities, may have themselves suffered from these tensions, and do not support violence. But, given that the attackers are a subset, given the sophisticated nature of some of these attacks and the asymmetrical nature of this conflict, we believe that the term "Fulani militants" remains as appropriate, as do others, such as the Global Terrorism Index.

Now, rather than debating now the pros and cons of a particular term, what I want to affirm in this oral testimony is that this is a situation leaving religious freedom and human rights in Nigeria's Middle Belt at a critical juncture. As has already been mentioned, some years, over the last few years, within the Middle Belt have seen fatalities greater than that created by Boko Haram in that particular year.

We have maintained our own independent tracker over these last 18 months, and we bring forward some of that tracker for the first time at this hearing. Our early analysis of 2017 indicates that, while the numbers of casualties have decreased in the first half of 2017, the frequency of attacks has increased. In the first half of 2017, there have already been 83 separate attacks impacting 61 different local government areas. In comparing the first half of 2017 to the first half of 2016, there has already been a 30 percent increase in the number of attacks. This is a real and escalating problem.

Now, in part, I think this has to do, as some of our panelists have described so well, with issues related to thresholds. A number of thresholds which prevent violence have been decreased. If you were to identify those thresholds and increase them, you would decrease the overall violence thresholds such as negative environmental impacts, changing migratory patterns, pressures on traditional lifestyles, lack of education, discrimination against religious minorities, influx of weapons, famine and famine like conditions, chaos caused by Boko Haram, lack of proper government responses, and undermined rule of law.

All of these lower the thresholds that would otherwise normally prevent this level of violence. We can identify them, we can address them, and we can increase the likelihood that large scale intercommunal violence will not be as prominent.

But in my closing time, I would like to say just a word about the victims. To be sure, all victims are equal and we grieve for every life that is lost. We remain gravely concerned that the longer that this situation festers, the more local communities will feel aggrieved and form into self protection units seeking their own extrajudicial retribution. There is already evidence that this is happening.

All victims who have suffered are equal in human dignity and in the eyes of the law. But in recent years, this has been a highly asymmetric conflict. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center estimates that, as of June 2017, there are 185,000 IDPs across the Middle Belt of Nigeria and that most of them are not living in camps but in communities that have been impacted or are themselves susceptible to attack.

Many of these IDPs report that they have never received any outside help or support. Thousands of hectares of crops have been destroyed, leaving portions of the Middle Belt more vulnerable to food insecurity and on the brink of famine. Thousands have died, as we have already established.

The tracker that we have been maintaining indicates that in the last 18 months somewhere less than 5 percent of all of the victims were Fulani. Somewhere over 90 percent of all of the victims have been non Fulani.

From January 2016 to July 2017, we believe there have been at least 179 different attacks, and available evidence appears to indicate that the vast majority of these attacks were initiated by Fulani militants and concentrated primarily, not solely, on villages that are predominantly comprised of Christians.

This is not to suggest that religion is the primary motivation. Our own working thesis, which continues to remain open to change as new evidence continues to emerge, is that Fulani militants seem to be primarily driven by an economic interest of securing additional and permanent grazing territory. But they are almost exclusively attacking local government areas that have high percentages of Christians, a minority religion. It is therefore an economic driver being played out along religious and ethnic lines in an environment of general insecurity and impunity thus, the real potential for further escalation.

Now, Christian LGAs, therefore, seem to be among those victims who have been most attacked and disproportionately suffer from this conflict, again, not because of predominantly religious rationales but seemingly out of a political calculation that there will not be negative repercussions for concentrating attacks on these communities. And the evidence on the ground thus far proves that calculation correct.

Again, even if the internal motivations of those who are engaging in these attacks are primarily economic or criminal or greed and have nothing to do with religion whatsoever, the violence is being most consistently and most comprehensively and most negatively deployed against religious minorities, which in this case happens to be Christians.

So, to restate it again, it is entirely possible, from our own research, that over 90 percent of the victims of the violence in the Middle Belt, as the Middle Belt is traditionally construed, come from non Fulani communities, mostly Christian predominant communities.

Now, if that is true, if it is true that these communities in the Middle Belt that have been most impacted and that are most vulnerable to these particular attacks, this can give policymakers areas for potential initial engagement. I agree that these have regional overtones, but to stop the violence is a first step. And as a first step, if we know these are

the communities that are most likely to be targeted, to ensure that they receive the police and federal protection that they need is a positive first step.

Let me conclude with offering just a few steps I think the Commission, beyond even just Congress, that this commission itself could take to help address these issues. Continue, number one, to urge the rapid appointment of an Assistant Secretary of State for Africa and, during the confirmation hearings, work with your colleagues to ensure that there are questions about religious freedom and human rights within Africa more broadly and Nigeria specifically.

Number two, strengthen and expand the portfolio of Ambassador Dan Mozena.

Ambassador Mozena is currently appointed as Senior Coordinator on Boko Haram. This position could be expanded to include not only Boko Haram but all of the issues of violence related in Nigeria, and his particular platform could be expanded. Number three, as you know, on December the 14th of this last year, Senate Bill 1632 and H.R. bill 3833 was signed into law, jointly directing the Department of State and Department of Defense to develop a 5 year strategy to help Nigeria. This could be expanded to not only include Boko Haram but violence in the Middle Belt and the region more broadly.

Unfortunately, there is not a lot of information out yet about how these two departments have conceived this plan and are working to implement this plan. Perhaps a letter from this commission inquiring about the status of that plan and whether it could be expanded to include regional issues might be warranted.

There is also, we understand, number four, an arms sale pending to Nigeria as we speak. We understand that that arms sale is to include human rights training. What is not clear is what that human rights training involves. What is not clear is how it will be implemented, how it will be monitored, how it will be evaluated, how it will be worked to ensure that our colleagues in Nigeria are also following up on this human rights training. Perhaps a letter, given the interest of this particular commission in human rights, to those who are conducting the sale, inquiring about what exactly does that human rights training entail, or even a hearing asking them, so that in our future arms sales to Nigeria or beyond we understand that, when it includes human rights training, it is more than just a slogan, we have examined the actual contents.

Finally, every 6 months, there is a scheduled bilateral commission meeting between the U.S. and Nigerian officials that has four working groups: human rights, agricultural development, economic development, and security. All of those working groups have relevance in the Middle Belt. Perhaps efforts could be made from this commission to send a letter to the relevant authorities encouraging them that at an upcoming scheduled bilateral commission the issue of the Middle Belt could be raised and discussed.

Thank you very much for your time.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Brown follows]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF ELIJAH BROWN

A Critical Human Rights Juncture in Nigeria

Elijah M. Brown, Ph.D.

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

September 27, 2017

21st Century Wilberforce Initiative www.21wilberforce.org

I. Introduction

It is an honor to participate in this important hearing. Thank you especially to Commission Co-Chairs the Honorable Congressman Randy Hultgren and the Honorable Congressman James P. McGovern. Thank you more broadly to the distinguished Members of this incredibly important Commission and to the staff who have helped make today possible.

I stand with the other witnesses in acknowledging that Nigeria is at a critical human rights juncture. One of the primary drivers of forces threatening to fracture Nigeria today is escalating conflict in the Middle Belt. Yet as far as I am aware this is the first hearing on Capitol Hill to uniquely focus on this reality. Thank you Commissioners for once again taking a leading voice in identifying emerging threats and seeking to build consensus on Capitol Hill and beyond on the primacy of human rights. Thank you.

It is my hope that those who are participating more broadly in this first of its kind hearing on conflict in the Middle Belt of Nigeria will follow your lead and join you in examining and deploying effective strategies to address violent attacks, restore communities that have been burned to the ground, and build platforms for collaborative peace.

II. Middle Belt Violence: A Serious Challenge Threatening to Fracture Nigeria

Middle Belt violence is a serious challenge threatening to fracture Nigeria. In 2016, the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative launched a major initiative to research and to build engagement around the religious freedom realities within Nigeria. As part of this effort members of our team including Congressman Frank R. Wolf and myself traveled throughout Nigeria interacting with more than 500 individuals and traveling to multiple sites in the states of Bauchi, Nasarawa, Plateau, and to Abuja, and meeting with representatives from Adamawa, Benue, Borno, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, and Sokoto.¹ Since then we have returned to Nigeria while also meeting with a number of key stakeholders including:

- Multiple U.S. Congressional leaders and their staff
- Assistant Secretary of State Linda Thomas-Greenfield
- Former U.S. Ambassadors to Nigeria, Ambassador Entwistle and Ambassador Campbell
- Current U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria, Ambassador Symington
- Variety of U.N. officials
- More than a dozen Members of the Nigerian National Assembly
- Many Nigerian partners

¹ In June 2016, the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative released a full 86 page report detailing a range of religious freedom challenges within Nigeria: 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative, "Nigeria: Fractured and Forgotten, Discrimination and Violence Along Religious Fault Lines" (June 2016): <http://www.standwithnigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Nigeria-Fractured-and-Forgotten.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2017).

Some of the numerous challenges currently facing Nigeria – such as Boko Haram in the northeast and more recently Biafra in the east – have received significant attention within both the Nigerian government and the international community. Unfortunately, violence in the Middle Belt has often been overlooked and deemphasized even in the midst of some particularly brutal hostilities.

Perhaps the most severe example of conflict in the Middle Belt is one that just passed its year-and-a-half anniversary with still none of the participants held accountable: the assault on Agatu. The Agatu attack began on Monday, February 22, 2016 at some point after midday. At least two flat-bottom boats sailed up the Benue River to launch a full-scale attack on the community. A Nigerian outfit called SBM Intelligence obtained cellphone video from a deceased terrorist and posted it to YouTube with the video showing the men getting ready to launch the boats upriver. The languages captured on this video include Fulfude, Hausa, Gurma and Zamara, of which the last two are more prominent in Niger.

The boats landed in the Agatu area around 3:00pm and immediately launched an attack. According to an eyewitness who visited with us five days after the attack, the militants were about to shoot when he began shouting that he was a Muslim. The attackers demanded he quote from the *Quran*, which the individual did and pointed to a small mosque as his normal place of worship. The Fulani militants repositioned their attack sparing that individual and those in that immediate vicinity. The attack lasted two days and multiple eyewitnesses, with whom we visited less than one week after this attack occurred, confirmed that at some point on Monday evening a helicopter landed and resupplied the militants.

Exact numbers are difficult to obtain and to verify, but according to the United Nations, ten Agatu villages were razed, 300 were killed and 20,000 displaced.²

Though some denied that Fulani had even participated in this attack,³ in an exclusive interview with *Premium Times* less than four weeks later, Saleh Bayeri, the Interim National Secretary of Gan Allah Fulani Association specifically claimed Fulani involvement and defended the actions of the Fulani militants noting that this “was a reprisal attack by his people against the Agatus” whom he accused of rustling 200 cattle and killing a prominent Fulani leader named Ardo Madaki three years prior.⁴

Taking at face value the factuality of these claims, raises additional questions. If it is true that Agatus stole 200 cattle and killed a prominent leader, the response claimed by this Fulani Association speaks to a level of sophistication that included waiting and planning over a three year period, enlisting attackers from outside the country, launching from boats moving upriver

² Rupert Colville, Spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, “OHCHR Press Briefing Notes – (1) Mozambique, (2) Nigeria,” (April 29, 2016).

³ Samuel Ogundipe, “Sultan Reacts to Benue, Enugu Killings, Says Blaming Fulani Herdsmen ‘Absurd,’” *Premium Times* (May 1, 2016), <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/202714-sultan-reacts-to-benue-enugu-killings-says-blaming-fulani-herdsmen-absurd.html> (accessed May 6, 2016).

⁴ Emmanuel Mayah, Sani Tukur and Hassan Adebayo, “Why We Struck in Agatu – Fulani Herdsmen,” *Premium Times* (March 19, 2016), <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/200426-exclusive-struck-agatu-fulani-herdsmen.html> (accessed May 6, 2016).

in the middle of the day, utilizing a helicopter at night to resupply, differentiating selection of targets on the basis of religion, retreating without interference, and to date, no known arrests.

This is not an isolated case. There are many examples throughout the Middle Belt of graphic violence, rapes, intentional targeting of religious minorities, and entire communities burned to the ground and forced to the brink of famine. What is unfolding is an evolving situation with a growing sophistication that suggests that a framework for analysis is perhaps no longer best understood through the lens of traditional farmer-herdsmen conflict.

To name a second, specific example, we visited with elders from Sho and Jol, two very small villages approximately 3 miles outside of Barkin Ladi. Both described how despite the fact that their communities had been repetitively attacked, no protection forces had been stationed in their villages. One elder from Sho began to cry describing how their village was at the time surviving in the midst of famine-like conditions by eating grass. The name of their village in the local language means “peace.” Peace is literally under siege in the Middle Belt.

The elders from Jol submitted written documentation and photographic evidence of destruction that included more than 100 dead, more than 10,000 displaced, more than 360 homes destroyed, over 1,400 hectares of crops ruined, and multiple hamlets destroyed with the land occupied by the attackers. As one of the community leaders from Jol expressed:

In our community we have [many] IDPs, but we have not received any help except for some mats that we have received. In the areas where the people have left because of displacement, the Fulani move in, take over that area, and settle down, and it becomes a place for the terrorists.

In 2014 a helicopter landed in a Fulani dominated area. We reported it to the security personnel, but they denied it. However, we saw that it landed at midnight and left at 4:00 a.m., and after that attacks occurred. The Fulani people have killed our women and killed members of our community in front of the security personnel. There is a complicity.

Members of Jol, and multiple other communities we visited, worry about a particular trend. In some instances, Fulani militants are burning hamlets, illegally erecting new structures, and assigning a new Fulani name to the area. Members of Jol worry this alteration of demographic and cartographic realities on the ground will leave Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from that area permanently displaced.

Though a very small community, Jol has estimated that the Fulani militants combined destruction of churches, crops, homes and materials totaled more than the equivalent of \$1.9 million USD.

Like Agatu, Jol and Sho are indicative of a story being repeated dozens and dozens of times across the most rural portions of the Middle Belt. These ongoing and repetitive attacks are having a profound impact on the breadbasket of Nigeria with significant negative ramifications.

III. Middle Belt Violence: The Need for a New Narrative and Analysis

As the consequences of repetitive attacks mount, the number of those impacted grows, feelings of isolation and retribution fester, and increasingly sophisticated weapons and tactics are deployed, there is a pressing need to move beyond a traditional farmer-herdsmen framework to a new narrative and analysis. Though there are no specific watershed moments demarcating this shift, 2014 seems to be a loose turning point.

Tensions and conflict have long existed between predominately Muslim, pastoralist Fulani and predominantly agrarian, Christian communities in the Middle Belt. Historically, traditional mechanisms for resolving conflict and restoring peace have been successful at the grassroots level when cattle have been raided, farm land trampled or other intercommunal relationships broken. These grassroots initiatives are often no longer effective.

The Middle Belt of Nigeria is a patchwork of religious and ethnic groupings with the single largest being that of the Fulani. Mostly cattle herders, there are more than 30 million Fulani across West Africa, with the largest groupings in Nigeria (18 million), Guinea (5 million), Cameroon (2 million), Mali (1 million), Niger (1 million) and Senegal (1 million).⁵

It is important to note the focus under discussion is on Fulani militants and not the Fulani as a whole, many of whom do not participate in acts of aggression, maintain peaceful coexistence with local communities, and do not support violence in the name of political or religious goals. Furthermore, the longer this conflict simmers the more likely individuals will embrace religious identities that can be militarized including Christian farmers who may form vigilante and reprisal attacks against Fulani. Should this occur, it would add to the levels of complexity and in worse case scenarios threaten the capital city of Abuja which lies along the Middle Belt.

This is in part why establishing a new narrative and analysis is so critical. Though multiple rationales exist for altering the traditional description of farmer-herdsmen conflict, two seem particularly noteworthy.

First, the preponderance of evidence, the predominantly asymmetrical nature of the attacks, and the growing sophistication in weapons and tactics simply does not fit a pattern connoted in a farmer-herdsmen motif.

One particular attack in mid-November 2016 garnered significant media attention within Nigeria and illustrates the growing complexities associated with this conflict. This specific incident focused on five villages in the Kuru Local Government Association (LGA) in Kaduna.⁶ It was an attack that left 45 villagers killed and destroyed 120 homes. The 21st Century Willberforce Initiative received gruesome pictures from contacts in Nigeria demonstrating that a number of those killed were hacked to death including toddlers wearing nothing but diapers. Available evidence speaks to a predominantly asymmetric attack with, in this case, the majority of the victims being children, women and the elderly.

Approximately three weeks after the attack, the governor of Kaduna, Malam Nasir el-Rufai released a statement noting that the massacre had been carried out by Fulani, that none of the

⁵ "Fulani / Fulbe," The Joshua Project, <https://joshuaproject.net/clusters/173> (accessed May 6, 2016).

⁶ "45 Killed in Yet Another Attack on Christian Communities in Nigeria," *World Watch Monitor* (November 19, 2016).

Fulani involved were from Nigeria, but were rather Fulani from Niger, Cameroon, Chad, Mali and Senegal. Furthermore, he noted that this was a reprisal attack from an incident in 2011 where individuals from the aforementioned countries had been killed as they moved cattle through that area, and that affected citizens should not arm themselves but trust the appropriate security forces for protection.⁷

Within a few days, the Senator representing that region released his response to the Governor in part to contradict what he claimed were misleading statements.⁸ The Senator's primary points were:

- It was inappropriate to characterize this as a reprisal attack given that he could find no documented evidence that individuals from those countries had been killed in that area in 2011 as claimed by the Governor;
- It was unlikely that Fulani from all of those countries would have converged in a rural part of Southern Kaduna which is not on a natural transitory route for cattle herders;
- If the Governor's investigation had been detailed enough within three weeks to accurately pinpoint the specific multi-national attackers, the Governor should release those details and locations to federal security forces, something that had not yet been done;
- The Governor had refused for more than a month requests from the Senator to discuss increasing security in Southern Kaduna;
- Weeks after the attack, the Kaduna State Government had not released any funds to help the victims even though there were still a number without food or shelter;
- Victims should be prepared to defend themselves because the State was unwilling to do so.

It is not possible to independently verify which of these two statements is more accurate. The point of its inclusion, however, is to demonstrate the level of tension that is growing. If the Governor's perspective is right it is troubling as it would indicate that this was a reprisal attack that was planned and executed over a five year period and that involved a multi-national attack inside Nigeria with foreign agents collaborating with one another from five countries.

If the Senator's perspective is correct it is also troubling as he directly accuses the Governor of fabricating evidence and attempting to shift blame from a local agency to a "foreign" element. This would raise additional sets of questions related to weapons, insecurity, and accountability.

Regardless of which perspective is a more accurate representation of the reality, what is left undisputed is that entire communities were burned to the ground, dozens of civilians were killed, and many more left homeless. It also demonstrates a growing complexity, a growing sophistication, increasing violence, integrated attacks, unassisted communities and growing calls for local communities to defend themselves. Since 2014 this has no longer been a simple conflict between farmers and herders. Fulani militants have been the overwhelming aggressors and are assaulting communities with supply helicopters, raids launched from multiple boats, machine guns mounted on vehicles, AK47s, scorched earth policies and sustained offensives that are leveling communities and that may last for months in particular locations without governmental intervention.

⁷ Isaiah Benjamin, "Foreigners Behind Southern Kaduna Massacre – el-Rufai," *Leadership Nigeria*, <http://leadership.ng/news/562419/foreigners-behind-southern-kaduna-massacre-el-rufai>, (December 4, 2016).

⁸ Press Statement from Senator Danjuma Tella Laah, December 8, 2016.

In addition, there is a second rationale for shifting to a new narrative and analysis. Though not yet reflected in the majority of media reports or international analysis, elites within Nigeria are themselves beginning to frame these attacks with language that moves beyond farmer-herdsmen constructs.

For example, in May 2016, President Buhari referenced Fulani attacks in the Middle Belt as those carried out by “foreigners” who had infiltrated the country. In September 2016, the influential Sultan of Sokoto, Sa’ad Abubakar III, noted for the first time his belief that there were Fulani herdsmen moving around with guns and causing violence with local farmers, and that these individuals were “foreign terrorists” who should be treated as terrorists “by the Nigerian security agencies.”⁹ In November 2016, the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria released a statement noting that criminals were using the Association to perpetrate illegal activities.¹⁰ Even as recently as this week, Garba Shehu, President Burhari’s Special Assistant on Media and Publicity, claimed that while the actions of Fulani herdsmen were not best understood in terms of terrorism, there were Fulani “criminal gangs” engaging in direct attacks on civilians in the Middle Belt.¹¹

In other words, within the last twelve months, key leaders within Nigeria have begun to acknowledge the attackers with labels such as foreigners, foreign terrorists, and criminal gangs.

Locating new terminology to describe the conflict on the ground is contested with different observers suggesting differing terminology with accompanying rationale. Even if there is not yet consensus around the most accurate terminology to utilize, due in part to difficulty in establishing organizing principles and the absence of clearly articulated rationales, there is emerging agreement that continuing to utilize a simple designation of herder-farmer conflict is misrepresentative and prevents further intentional engagement at a time when such engagement is essential.

IV. Middle Belt Violence: An Escalating Reality

What is without question is that violence in the Middle Belt is an escalating reality. This is in part due to cattle rustling that exists within the Middle Belt to the detriment of Fulani pastoralists. However, the majority of the attacks in recent years cannot be construed solely as reprisals. SBM Intelligence notes that between 1997 and 2010 there were 18 incidents involving herdsmen and farming communities in the Middle Belt while between 2011 and 2015, there were 371.¹² Moreover the majority of the attacks are initiated by Fulani militants and due to their ability to secure significantly more sophisticated weapons and maintain sustained

⁹ “Fulani Herdsmen Moving with Guns are Foreign Terrorists – Sultan,” *Vanguard* (September 13, 2016): <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/09/fulani-herdsmen-moving-guns-foreign-terrorists-sultan/> (accessed November 9, 2016).

¹⁰ “Herdsmen Association Warn Members Against Criminal Activity,” *Pulse Nigeria* (November 6, 2016).

¹¹ “Killer Herdsmen Not Terrorists, Says Garba Shehu,” *Nigeria Today* (September 22, 2017): <https://www.nigeriatoday.ng/2017/09/killer-herdsmen-not-terrorists-says-garba-shehu/> (accessed September 25, 2017).

¹² “Death and the Herdsmen,” *SBM Intelligence*, 5-6.

offensives without significant pushback or judicial accountability, the conflict is highly asymmetric.

Throughout 2016, the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative maintained an ongoing tabulation building upon available public and private data. The numbers we suggest underreport what is actually occurring. For example, in attacks resulting in the deaths of “multiple” though numerically unspecified individuals, we used the number “two” as the lowest possible accounting for “multiple” when in fact the numbers may have been significantly higher. If there were conflicting reports regarding a particular situation, we used the lowest reported number. We know that our numbers are therefore underreporting the gravity of the situation. All the same, focused exclusively on Fulani militancy, in 2016:

Total Number of Non-Fulani Victims:	1,141
Total Number of Fulani Victims:	31 (2.7% of the total)
Total Number of Attacks:	96
Total Number of LGAs:	58
States Impacted:	21

We have maintained a similar tracker for 2017, here reporting for the first time January – July 2017:

Total Number of Non-Fulani Victims:	264
Total Number of Muslim, Non-Fulani Victims:	21
Total Number of Fulani Victims:	24 (7.8% of the total)
Total Number of Attacks:	83 (63 similar attacks last year, 31.7% increase)
Total Number of LGAs:	61
States Impacted:	31

This is to say that the trend line of lethality that loosely began in 2014 is continuing into 2017. While positively, in the first six months of 2017 there has been a significant decrease in the number of victims, there has been an increase in the frequency of attacks. In comparing the first half of 2017 to the first half of 2016, the number of attacks rose from 63 to 83, an increase of 31.7%.

The geographic scope and diversity impacted by Fulani militancy is more sizeable and significant than that of Boko Haram. This is not to compare Fulani militancy directly to Boko Haram. One of the significant differentiators is that Boko Haram’s impact has been less-broad but far deeper. It was more total destruction. Fulani militancy appears to be more surgical, targeting specific LGAs while leaving alone certain areas altogether. It is important to again note that the focus under discussion is on Fulani militants and not the Fulani as a whole.

Even where our data is limited, incomplete or undervalues the numerical impact, additional sources continue to confirm that Fulani militancy is an escalating threat with significant negative ramifications. For example:

- In announcing the first of its kind hearing on Capitol Hill focused on conflict in the Middle Belt, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission noted that Middle Belt conflict cost the Nigerian economy between 2012-2015 \$14 billion USD.¹³
- The 2015 Global Terrorism Index described Fulani Militants as the fourth most lethal group in their Index.¹⁴ Throughout 2016, Nigeria was the only country tracked by the Global Terrorism Index simultaneously facing two of the top five most lethal organizations.
- The 2016 Global Terrorism Index noted positively that there were fewer deaths related to terrorism across the world including an 18% reduction in the number of people killed by Boko Haram in Nigeria.¹⁵ Even with this reduction, Nigeria remained just behind Iraq and Afghanistan as the third most impacted country by terrorism in the world. The report noted that there had been a significant reduction in number of individuals killed across the Middle Belt while still stating, “Attacks by Fulani ethnic militants – groups of semi-nomadic, ethnic-based pastoralists engaged in conflict with farming communities – were recorded in the Middle Belt.”¹⁶ This generally occurs with available evidence related to numbers killed in 2015, the year reported by the 2016 report. It is anticipated that the 2017 Global Terrorism Index will indicate an uptick related to Fulani militants.
- In their 2017 report, the Pew Research Center documents that within the twenty-five most populous countries in the world, Nigeria has the highest social hostilities due to religion, of which Middle Belt violence is one contributor.¹⁷
- In their 2017 report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended Nigeria as a Tier 1 Country of Particular Concern writing in part, “Sectarian violence between predominantly Muslim herders and predominantly Christian farmers increased, and the Nigerian federal government failed to implement effective strategies to prevent or stop such violence or to hold perpetrators accountable.”¹⁸ Their report continued:

In recent years, sectarian violence has occurred in rural areas between predominantly Christian farmers and predominantly Muslim nomadic herders. While this violence usually does not start as a religious conflict, it often takes on religious undertones and is

¹³ “Nigeria: Conflict in the Middle Belt,” Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, United States Congress, Announcement (September 27, 2017), <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/events/hearings/nigeria-conflict-middle-belt> (accessed September 25, 2017).

¹⁴ “Global Terrorism Index 2015: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism,” *Institute for Economics & Peace* (November 2015), 22.

¹⁵ “Global Terrorism Index 2016: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism,” *Institute for Economics & Peace* (November 2016), 2, 4.

¹⁶ “Global Terrorism Index 2016), *Institute for Economics & Peace*, 27.

¹⁷ Michael Lipka, “Religious Restrictions Vary Significantly in the World’s Most Populous Countries,” *Pew Research Center* (April 13, 2017), [http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/13/religious-restrictions-vary-significantly-in-the-worlds-most-populous-countries/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/13/religious-restrictions-vary-significantly-in-the-worlds-most-populous-countries/http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/13/religious-restrictions-vary-significantly-in-the-worlds-most-populous-countries/) (accessed on September 26, 2017).

¹⁸ “Nigeria Chapter – 2017 Annual Report,” *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom* (April 2017), <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Nigeria.2017.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2017).

perceived as a religion-based conflict for many involved.... Recurrent violence in rural areas increased in the reporting period, resulting in hundreds of deaths and a number of churches destroyed. Such attacks were reported in Kaduna, Plateau, Bauchi, Taraba, and Benue states. For example, in March in Agatu Local Government Area, Benue State, an estimated 100–300 were killed and there were reports of at least six villages destroyed. On December 19, the Catholic Archdiocese of Kafan reported that in 2016 at least 800 were killed in sectarian violence in 53 villages in southern Kaduna. The Archdiocese also reported that 16 churches were destroyed during the year. The Nigerian government has long failed to respond adequately to this violence. The federal police are rarely deployed, let alone in a timely manner. While the government deployed police and the military to southern Kaduna to address violence in that area, nongovernmental interlocutors universally told USCIRF that the deployments stick to main roads and do not venture into more rural areas where the violence occurs, and they do not respond when forewarned of the potential for violence or when violence occurs.¹⁹

- In their 2017 Mid-Year Update, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre noted, “International attention has tended to focus on Boko Haram’s brutality, but inter-communal clashes fueled by ethnic and religious tensions flare regularly throughout the Middle Belt, the dividing line between the Muslim north and Christian south. Communal violence is triggered by myriad factors, including ethno-religious disputes, crime, cattle rustling, land disputes and tensions between pastoralists and farmers.”²⁰

This 2017 Mid-Year Update built upon their earlier reports which not only indicated a growing level of violence, but that such violence should be understood in part as an outgrowth of ethnic and religious identifications. For example, the IDMC had found that of all the IDPs in Nigeria, 12.6 percent were displaced due to communal clashes, 2.4 percent by natural disasters, and 85 percent “as a result of insurgency attacks by Islamists.”²¹ In what remains the IDMC’s most recent map, they have a category they call “religious violence,” and they have mapped “religious violence” conflicts only in the Middle Belt.²² In other words, the IDMC only associates “religious violence” with Fulani militancy and not with Boko Haram.²³ Moreover, out of the twenty countries the IDMC is currently tracking in Sub-Saharan Africa, religious violence as a cause for internal displacement is only found in the Middle Belt of Nigeria.

¹⁹ Nigeria Chapter – 2017 Annual Report,” *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Nigeria.2017.pdf>.

²⁰ “Nigeria: Mid-Year Update 2017 (January – June),” *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre* <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/nigeria/> (accessed September 25, 2017).

²¹ “Nigeria IDP Figures Analysis,” *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre*, <http://www.internal-displacement.org/sub-saharan-africa/nigeria/figures-analysis> (accessed May 6, 2016).

²² Map of “Nigeria: Internal Displacement as of December 2014,” *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre*, <http://www.internal-displacement.org/sub-saharan-africa/nigeria/2014/nigeria-internal-displacement-as-of-december-2014> (accessed May 6, 2016).

²³ Given Boko Haram’s pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, some might question the exclusion of Boko Haram. However the point here is to highlight that religion – even if only one among others – remains a factor in the Middle Belt.

- In a September 2017 report issued by the International Crisis Group entitled, “Herders against Farmers: Nigeria’s Expanding Deadly Conflict,” they write:

Violent conflicts between nomadic herders from northern Nigeria and sedentary agrarian communities in the central and southern zones have escalated in recent years and are spreading southward, threatening the country’s security and stability. With an estimated death toll of approximately 2,500 people in 2016, these clashes are becoming as potentially dangerous as the Boko Haram insurgency in the north east. Yet to date, response to the crisis at both the federal and state levels has been poor.²⁴

The report continues:

As these conflicts increase in frequency, intensity and geographical scope, so does their humanitarian and economic toll. The increasing availability of illicit firearms, both locally-produced and smuggled in from outside, worsens the bloodshed. Over the past five years, thousands have been killed; precise tallies are unavailable, but a survey of open source reports suggests fatalities may have reached an annual average of more than 2,000 from 2011 to 2016, for some years exceeding the toll from the Boko Haram insurgency. Tens of thousands have been forcibly displaced, with properties, crops and livestock worth billions of naira destroyed, at great cost to local and state economies.²⁵

- The *Council on Foreign Relations* maintains in the Nigeria Security Tracker one of the most comprehensive and publicly available trackers related to number of individuals killed. If their data set is restricted to January 2016 – September 2017 in order to gather a more recent snapshot, their data indicates that Sectarian Actors – of which Fulani militants are undoubtedly the largest – have led to more deaths in the previous 27 months than Boko Haram. While Borno remain the state within this timeframe suffering the highest number of casualties, the second state is that of Benue, one of the states most impacted by Fulani militancy.²⁶

All of this data points towards one direction: violence in the Middle Belt is escalating and necessitates altered engagement both within Nigeria and the international community.

V. Middle Belt Violence: Who are the Primary Victims?

To date much of the more systematic research has focused on establishing this new reality, seeking to determine the overall impact and considering the drivers to this conflict – all of which are critical. Research focused on the victims has often been more anecdotal.

Perhaps one possible exception may be by the International Criminal Court. Though it appears to be in very early stages and has not been independently confirmed, there are reports that the Officer of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) has opened an investigation

²⁴ “Herders Against Farmers: Nigeria’s Expanding Deadly Conflict,” *International Crisis Group* (September 19, 2017), i.

²⁵ “Herders Against Farmers,” *International Crisis Group*, i-ii.

²⁶ “Nigeria Security Tracker: Mapping Violence in Nigeria,” Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigeria-security-tracker/p29483> (accessed September 25, 2017).

into the actions of Fulani militants in the Middle Belt. Of course the ICC may well determine to close this investigation without additional public disclosure.²⁷ However, should it move forward it would likely help give greater focus on the victims themselves.

What is clear is that thousands have died and that in some years the numbers killed in the Middle Belt might have surpassed the numbers killed by Boko Haram in that particular year. There are growing concerns about reprisal attacks, the most gruesome of which was in October 2016 when a mob formed around a commercial bus that had broken down in Kaduna State, hacked the Fulani passengers to death, set the bus and one other vehicle on fire, and killed 14.²⁸ Nonetheless, the tracker we are maintaining at the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative indicates that in the last eighteen months (January 2016 – July 2017), less than 4% of all victims were Fulani.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center estimates that as of June 2017 there were 185,000 IDPs across the Middle Belt of Nigeria, and most are not living in camps but in communities that have been impacted or are susceptible to attack.²⁹ Many of these IDPs report that they have not received any outside help or support. Thousands of hectares of crops have been destroyed leaving portions of the Middle Belt more vulnerable to food insecurity and even famine. Multiple villages have been burned to the ground, and in at least some instances, that territory has been claimed by Fulani militants for grazing territory.

Since January 2016 there have been at least 179 different attacks. Available evidence appears to indicate that the vast majority of these attacks have been asymmetrical, initiated by Fulani militants, and concentrated on villages that are predominantly comprised of Christians.

There is evidence that some Fulani in neighboring countries have been radicalized, and that given the interplay and interlinks between Fulani, this could have knock-on effects in Nigeria and beyond.³⁰ There are also indicators that some Fulani militants are repeating the tactics of Boko Haram in terms of community attacks. Nonetheless, it must be stressed that as of yet there are not substantive indicators that religion is the primary motivation.

Our own working thesis, which continues to remain open to change as new evidence emerges:

Fulani militants seem to be primarily driven by economic interests of securing additional and permanent grazing territory but are almost exclusively attacking LGAs that have high percentages of Christians, a minority religion. It is therefore an economic driver being played out along religious and ethnic lines in an environment of general insecurity and impunity and thus has real potential for further escalation.

²⁷ Wale Odunsi, "Herdsman Killings: ICC Begins Investigation," *Daily Post* (August 17, 2017), <http://dailypost.ng/2017/08/17/herdsmen-killings-icc-begins-investigation/> (accessed September 26, 2017).

²⁸ "Mob Attacks Fulani Herdsmen in Nigeria," *AFP* (October 18, 2016): <http://www.timeslive.co.za/africa/2016/10/18/Mob-attacks-Fulani-herdsmen-in-Nigeria> (accessed November 9, 2016).

²⁹ "Nigeria: Figures Analysis," *Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre* <http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/country-profiles/NGA-Nigeria-Figures-Analysis.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2017).

³⁰ Akinyemi Akinrujumu, "Buhari Blames Mali, Libya for Fulani Herdsmen Attacks," *Naij* (November 22, 2016).

Christian LGAs therefore seem to be the primary victims of the attacks and have disproportionately suffered from this conflict, not primarily because of religious rationales, but seemingly out of a political calculation that there will not be significant negative repercussions for concentrating attacks on these communities. The evidence on the ground thus far proves the calculation accurate. The numbers of victims and costs to peace and human flourishing are already astonishing, but should this cycle continue, the possibility that this could devolve into a conflict more clearly framed around religious lines is real and which could have catastrophic consequences for Nigeria and the region as a whole.

Some, such as the on-the-ground organization the Stefanos Foundation, believe that the process of religious ideological calcification is already further advanced. Others believe that this not yet a significant factor. Identifying where on this continuum the process exists is difficult. What is clear – even if the internal motivations are primarily economic – the violence is being most consistently deployed against religious minorities, which in this case are Christian communities.

It is possible that over 90% of all of the victims of the violence in the Middle Belt come from Christian communities.

If it is true that these are the communities in the Middle Belt that have been most impacted and that are most vulnerable to these particular attacks, that should give policy makers areas for potential initial engagement.

VI. Middle Belt Violence: Lowered Thresholds Driving this Violence

Addressing the conflict in the Middle Belt is urgent. While identifying the organizers of the violence remains contested, one approach would be to consider how to increase the barriers that naturally preclude violent attacks. Conversely, ongoing corruption, negative reactions from the government and government forces, undermined rule of law, weakened institutions, famine, and the violence of Boko Haram have all lowered the thresholds towards violence in Nigeria. If these thresholds could be strengthened the result would be a decrease in conflict. Though others could be identified, ten thresholds seem to be of particular relevance.

1. Lack of development, lack of infrastructure, lack of education and lack of meaningful employment opportunities across much of northern Nigerian and the Middle Belt;
2. Influx of weapons and a lowering of their price across West Africa in general, in part due to failed states such as Libya;
3. Transnational loyalty and relationships among Fulani that enhance spread of weapons, negative ideology, sources of solidarity and perhaps at times experienced militants;
4. Pastoral lifestyle that has existed for hundreds of years and maintains an ideal status within the collective identity of many Fulani is facing substantive pressure and the possibility that this system could collapse. This includes financial pressures, tightening border control, restricted access to previous grazing routes, and changing environmental patterns;
5. Changing migratory and ownership patterns within Fulani are forcing migration patterns that are more southward and western and bringing new Fulani into local contexts without established local relationships. There are also changing dynamics around cattle ownership and the possibility that at least a few elites may be using off-the-books Fulani protection units to guard and move their cattle;
6. Growth of negative religious ideology among some;

7. General chaos and opportunistic cover provided by Boko Haram;
8. Hollowing out of the Nigerian State and historic ramifications of corruption which also corresponds to a strengthening within impacted communities that their religion is under attack and they need to look to themselves and/or their co-religionists / co-ethnicities for self-protection;
9. Lack of appropriate government response which in general has tended not to respond to violence in the Middle Belt and which in turn enforces the pursued actions, sense of victimization, self-organized protection, and an enhanced spiral of violence;
10. Negative on the ground narratives and legal realities which are clouding new engagement including: (1) historic context of discrimination against religious minorities, (2) historic narratives of victimhood, (3) constitutional issues around definitions of indigenous communities, and (4) continued narratives framed around herder-farmer conflict.

Though each threshold is unique, they are interrelated, and they each offer a meaningful point of engagement by both the Nigerian and the international community. Should these various thresholds be raised, the likelihood of largescale intercommunal violence would decrease.

VII. Middle Belt Violence: Strategies for Engagement Today

Nigeria is facing a critical human rights juncture. But it is not a situation without hope. Real and significant progress has been made in addressing other challenges within Nigeria, and real and significant progress is available within the Middle Belt. Among other possibilities, the following strategies could lead to greater engagement today:

1. Identify strategies to address each of the above thresholds so that violence is less likely.
2. Urge the rapid appointment of an Assistant Secretary of State for Africa and during the confirmation hearings work to ensure there are questions about religions freedom within Africa broadly and Nigeria specifically.
3. When conflict in the Middle Belt is combined with the ongoing famine and Boko Haram, this complex situation quickly becomes a regional problem with trans-national movement and support. Urge the appointment of a Special Envoy who could marshal a regional response or otherwise work to ensure that there is a formal working group within the various regional stakeholders seeking to address these realities.
4. Strengthen and expand the portfolio of Ambassador Dan Mozena. Ambassador Mozena is currently appointed as Senior Coordinator on Boko Haram. This position could be expanded to include Boko Haram and violence in the Middle Belt and Ambassador Mozena's platform for engagement could be strengthened.
5. On December 14, 2016 S. 1632 / H.R. 3833 was signed into law directing the Departments of State and Defense to jointly develop a five-year strategy to help Nigeria. This could be expanded to include not only Boko Haram but also violence in the Middle Belt. Given the impact this strategy could ultimately have on the human rights situation in Nigeria, this Commission could request a hearing to evaluate the degree to which this plan has been developed and implemented.
6. Every six months there is a scheduled Bi-Lateral Commission meeting held between U.S. and Nigerian officials that has four working groups: Human Rights, Agricultural Development, Economic Development and Security, all of which would have relevance in the Middle Belt. Efforts could be taken to encourage the Bi-Lateral Commission to strategically discuss the Middle Belt.

7. In any pending or future arms sales to Nigeria, work to ensure that sale includes human rights training. To further emphasize this importance, this Commission could request a hearing that would investigate the actual curriculum on human rights training that is being offered, who is conducting that training, mechanisms to connect the human rights training to relevant Nigerian stakeholders such as the Human Rights Committee of the Nigerian National Assembly, and methods being utilized to evaluate the effectiveness and implementation of this training.
8. Work with counterparts in the Nigerian National Assembly to constitute a caucus focused on religious freedom and human rights among minority populations across Nigeria.
9. Call on the Nigerian Government to demonstrate their commitment to rule of law by stationing police across the Middle Belt in communities that have already been impacted.
10. Urge people of faith and goodwill across Nigeria to continue to build relationships with one another and to peacefully work towards a shared future of continued flourishing.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you, Dr. Brown.

Again, thank you all for being here. I also want to thank those in the audience who joined us, who are active and engaged in this, of making sure we do everything we can to bring recognition and peace and justice to this very important land.

I am going to recognize Co Chairman McGovern. He might have something that he is going to have to run off to, so I am going to recognize him for questions first.

Mr. McGOVERN: Well, thank you. I appreciate it.

And I thank you all for your testimonies.

Whoever wants to answer this, all of you or anybody, but I am just listening to the testimonies here, and there is, you know, a little bit of divergence, kind of competing narratives on some of the things.

And I was wondering, have there been efforts to encourage an independent international investigation into the situation in the Middle Belt? And do you think that such an initiative would be constructive in light of, you know, the limitations on available data and the competing narratives and interpretations of events on the ground?

Mr. BROWN: I will just add simply that there are recent reports I cannot independently confirm them, but recent reports just in the last month that the International Criminal Court has received enough complaints that they are initiating an investigation into what is happening inside the Middle Belt. As far as I am aware, from an international body, that might be one which is currently undertaking that kind of review.

Mr. McGOVERN: Anybody have a would it be a good idea to try and encourage an international—

Mr. BROWN: Yes.

Mr. McGOVERN: --investigation into the situation? Or do you think we have enough investigations going on?

Mr. HOGENDOORN: I mean, to be perfectly frank, I think ultimately this is a Nigerian problem, and I would argue that it would be much more useful to get a consensus amongst the Nigerian elites as to what is happening in their country.

And so I would urge you to talk to your counterparts in Nigeria to mount a credible and effective and high powered commission from both the north and the south, from both the Christian and the Muslim community, to investigate this, rather than have the international community do that.

I should also say—

Mr. McGOVERN: Yeah. And, by the way, I am not suggesting that I mean, I am not here to say that the International Criminal Court should be doing it. I am just asking the question, because there seems to be some different interpretations.

And I agree with you, if we can get the Nigerian Government to do the investigation so that people feel comfortable that all these issues are being investigated, that you know, I am not trying to undermine or go around the Nigerian Government. I am just trying to get your opinions on how we might kind of get unanimity in terms of our interpretation of what is going on. And that is what I was—

Mr. HOGENDOORN: Well, just to finish, all I can say is that Nigeria is a very proud country, and I think that, were there to be an international finding, it would be critiqued by whoever felt that it was biased towards the other side. And so I don't think it would necessarily be helpful unless it was an institution that the Nigerians trusted and felt very confident in. And that would be challenging.

Mr. McGOVERN: Yes?

Ms. ADEMOLA ADELEHIN: I would just like to contribute that maybe what would also be very important is to look at recommendations from many, many researches that have been done nationally and regionally and to really assess the responses to those recommendations to be able to address the gaps as they continue to exist.

Rather than also reinventing the wheel of going back to the field to ask the same questions, Most of those questions have been asked over and over again, with direct responses to them. I think that is what perhaps the questions could be asked more on that, rather than going back to the field to ask those questions again.

Mr. McGOVERN: Well, okay. No, I take your point. I am not disputing I am just raising questions here.

How would you recommend the State Department and USAID reshape U.S. assistance to Nigeria to strengthen the federal and state governments' ability to peacefully the drivers of the farmer herder conflict?

And, specifically, how can we improve the U.S. Government's support to land reform and adaptation to climate change as well as conflict mediation, resolution, reconciliation, and peace building mechanisms?

Ms. ONUBOGU: Thank you for your question.

So, to answer part of your question about how we can reshape or encourage State Department's assistance—

Mr. McGOVERN: Whatever word makes the most sense. How we can be more constructive.

Ms. ONUBOGU: Could be more constructive.

Mr. McGOVERN: Right.

Ms. ONUBOGU: I think there has to be more engagement with the state governments at the state level. There is a lot of engagement at the national level, but a lot of these conflicts occur at the state level. A lot of the state governors control state budgets that are actually as large as budgets of individual countries in West Africa. So empowering them and ensuring that the early warning systems that exist in their states already, that there is capacity to actually respond effectively to conflict when it occurs. And then also trying to strengthen them to ensure that the process of responding isn't reactionary but that they are able to prevent conflict from happening.

So encouraging more engagement at the state level is what I would propose.

Mr. McGOVERN: And does our embassy do that? I mean, is it basically national government to national government? I mean, does our embassy, our human rights people get out? I mean, do we go out and meet with the state leaders?

Ms. ONUBOGU: There is actual engagement going on at the state level. USIP is currently implementing a program with support from the U.S. State Department Conflict Stabilization Office. We are engaging with state governors from across northern Nigeria to basically look at their priorities and addressing drivers of insecurity in their states. And we are looking across all the 19 states in northern Nigeria.

So there is engagement—

Mr. McGOVERN: Good.

Ms. ONUBOGU: --going on at the state level, and more engagement would be nice as well.

Mr. BROWN: Can I just nuance that slightly from my own perspective? When we met with the U.S. Embassy there, they often had not traveled in much of the affected areas in the Middle Belt because of the level of violence that is there and, frankly, the insecurity. And we understand.

So, at the grassroots level, there hasn't been as much opportunity, from my perspective, for the U.S. Embassy who are doing a great job. We have had an excellent

relationship with Ambassador Symington and think he is doing an outstanding job, while recognizing there are real limitations at the grassroots level.

And I just would want to nuance that one other element. Thirty percent of the Middle Belt and the northern states as a whole are Christians. And what many of those religious minorities report over and over again is that they experience discrimination at the state level, because many of the state levels view that minority population as transplants from the south and deny them the opportunities to participate.

So I fully affirm and agree that more state level engagement is needed, while also recognizing that those minority groups are often cut out. We have been in some of those areas where they have reported, for example, that the state would call a local meeting related to security and wouldn't call anybody from the religious minority community. We have been in communities where the religious minority community had no polling station at all and were simply cut out from the political process.

So, in an environment where there is already religious discrimination, if you focus only on the elites and the Embassy is unable to get out to the true grassroots level, it does create mixed understandings.

Mr. McGOVERN: Yeah. Go ahead.

Ms. ADEMOLA ADELEHIN: Okay. Multiple questions, but I would just like to maybe suggest three things.

And one of these is, as opposed to civil society organizations, working with local communities to really strengthen connections. And that makes peaceful coexistence more possible and deemphasizes the differences.

USAID supporting social common ground and facilitating a platform where local communities can sit together to discuss the tension that could give rise to violence and for them to collaboratively address those issues using their own reality. It is not just for herders, neither just for farmers; for herders, farmers, and the local government authorities and other stakeholders, where they jointly own the process. Because the most successful peace building solutions are those that are locally owned and supported. And through USAID's support, we are doing this a lot in the Middle Belt.

And I want to also talk about two other things. Currently, in 2016, the Nigerian Government attempted to legislate on issues of ranching or creating grazing routes, which became very political. And, at the end of the day, because of the provisions of the Land Use Act of Nigeria, it was dropped, and it now went to state assemblies.

But what should be seen at the state assembly is that there is still no national framework to ensure that there is balance in giving this legislation. For example, we have been in states where legislation has been given banning open grazing. The

pastoralist community believes it is targeting them directly. And even local communities are interpreting this law negatively.

So that is a risk, that support should be to the Nigerian Government to see that there is at least this blanket framework that can ensure that there is balance in legislation at the state level so it doesn't create more harm but, rather, promotes peace.

And I think one of the top points I also wanted to mention is investment in the agriculture and livestock development. Nigeria is a huge population, a huge market. But because farmers and pastoralists look at farming and livestock development as sustenance, they are clinging a lot to those states that want to protect the little they have. But with more training and investment in agriculture and in livestock development, the value chain management and development and other value adding, then there will be more opportunity for farmers to see beyond their 100 cows, let me protect it with all my life, my small plot of land, let me protect it with all my life, to really see that business expanding.

And then I also say the same about the relationship. I think investment in developing the agri would go a long way to address some of the root causes. And we also provide a special opportunity, employment opportunity, for young people. Many of them are unemployable that have been causing the vicious cycle of violence. For example, in the Middle Belt, in Plateau State, since 2001, 2002, even beyond, there have been young people that have been negatively affected, street children created. And this investment in agriculture and the livestock would give opportunity for trading that can even engage the vulnerable youth that often are used and misused to cause violence in this farmer herder conflict.

So those are the three points I wanted to make.

Mr. McGOVERN: I appreciate that.

Doctor, do you have anything to add?

Mr. HOGENDOORN: Well, just very quickly, I would like to second what Oge is saying. I think that the right governors can make a huge difference in their state, and they should be supported.

And one should remember that Nigeria is a middle income country, and it has a lot of capacity. So there is actually a lot of capability to make significant differences. And certain governors have changed the situation in their states dramatically over their terms.

The other thing I would like to mention is police reform. I mean, the reality is that the police is dysfunctional the federal police is dysfunctional in Nigeria. It has created a huge problem. It is one of the reasons, also, why the military is often deployed

to try to address these problems. And, as we know, the military is not equipped to normally deal with criminality—

Mr. McGOVERN: Absolutely.

Mr. HOGENDOORN: --and these kinds of unrest. And so it is kind of creating this vicious circle of retaliatory violence, and that is kind of escalating the conflict as well. So that is another issue that could be addressed.

Mr. McGOVERN: No, I think that is an important point.

I want to thank you. I am sorry, I have to excuse myself. But, as evidenced by my questions, I am not an expert on what is happening in Nigeria. We are here to kind of learn, to figure out, you know, if we can be helpful. And I respect all the organizations that you represent here, and I appreciate the work, the collaborations that are going on. And, obviously, what we believe in is peace building and conflict resolution and respect for human rights and, you know, religious freedom. And, I mean, we all share that. So, you know, even after this hearing, if you have suggestions of constructive things that we can do, we would certainly like to work with you.

But, again, I appreciate your work and your dedication on this. And I apologize, I am going to have to excuse myself. But thank you.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you so much.

Dr. Hogendoorn, if I can address, first, a couple questions to you, if that is all right. You talked about how it certainly appears that this conflict is spreading to different parts and regions of Nigeria. I wonder, in your opinion and from some of the work that you all have done, how far you think this conflict could spread, and might it even affect other countries around Nigeria?

Mr. HOGENDOORN: Well, as I have suggested, it is our assessment that the main reason why this conflict is spreading in Nigeria, at least, is because herders are being pushed farther south, and so they are affecting more areas in both the middle and now also in the Middle Belt and also in southern Nigeria.

The problem, as has been suggested, is that this is radicalizing both communities, not just Christians but also Fulani herders. And as I suggested in my earlier testimony, the Fulani have kin throughout all of West Africa; as well as, as I suggested, that this is a phenomenon that is not unique to Nigeria, but this pressure that is being placed on herders because of population, environmental degradation, is seen throughout the Sahelian belt, so basically this entire area that could spread all the way from Mauritania all the way Eritrea, really, if you wanted to look at it completely. These are people that are feeling the same pressure. By that, what I mean is that these people have kinship networks, and so they could be brought in.

We do know that the Fulani, as a people of 20 million people, are concerned. They are concerned about their livelihoods, and they are starting to try to organize to try to have some kind of a regional response. Clearly, it would be useful if people engage with them at this point in time rather than allow them to be militarized and also be instrumentalized by groups that are trying to propose a radical ideology and, you know, an anti Western ideology.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thanks.

Obviously, you talk about it spreading and potential for greater spread, but also talk about how this is fundamentally a Nigerian problem, it is something that the Nigerian Government needs to be dealing with.

I wondered if you could talk a little bit about your belief in their capabilities right now to be able to handle these challenges and handle this crisis and maybe some other crises that might come up as well. And if they are capable of doing that, why haven't we seen more action yet?

Mr. HOGENDOORN: Well, the shortest is there is a lack of political will. The reality is that, at least in my view and my colleagues could disagree, but I think political elites in Nigeria are living quite well with the status quo. And the status quo includes a lot of misgovernance, systemic corruption, and all kinds of other attendant problems that are actually creating lots and lots of frustrations which are driving radicalization not just with Boko Haram but also in the Middle Belt, also in the south with the Igbo secessionist uprising that you may have read about in the southeast.

But, at the same time, why I am so optimistic about Nigeria is that there is also enormous human capacity to actually implement policies. I think the best example I could perhaps give you is if you remember the Ebola crisis in West Africa. So, when the Ebola crisis broke out, everyone was very concerned that if it would spread to Nigeria that it could become a huge international crisis. There were a couple of cases that occurred in Abuja and in Lagos, and, amazingly, the Nigerian Government stepped up. They implemented a very, you know, rigorous public health campaign and essentially ended that, the point being that the Nigerian Government can do this. The problem is just getting political elites to spend the political capital and the resources to actually address these problems, in my view.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thanks.

Ms. Onubogu, I wonder if I could address a couple questions to you. I am wondering if there are similar factors driving this conflict as others in Nigeria or maybe even more broadly in West Africa, and would, in your opinion, addressing this conflict have beneficial effects on other conflicts that we are seeing either in Nigeria or in the region?

Ms. ONUBOGU: Thank you very much. And I also just want to add one more point, as well—

Mr. HULTGREN: That would be great. Please.

Ms. ONUBOGU: --to what E.J. mentioned, as well, about resolving the conflict, that we have seen competing narratives about the drivers of the farmer herder conflicts in Nigeria that has made dialogue impossible and made it impossible to bring the right people to the table to actually think about crafting a well coordinated and a holistic national approach to address these issues.

The farmer herder conflicts, as we see them in Nigeria, and as I have mentioned in my testimony, it is important for us to view the conflicts within the Middle Belt within the context of the broader farmer herder conflicts across the board in Nigeria. Because when we are able to do that, it gives us an opportunity to really understand the crisis, understand the drivers of the crisis, and be able to look beyond the identities and the stereotypes that feed the different narratives, but also see that this is a crisis that impacts the economic well being of a country and that impacts, as has mentioned here, the agricultural landscape, as well, in the country.

As we have all mentioned here, the importance of Nigeria cannot be underestimated, the importance of Nigeria in West Africa and importance of Nigeria across the entire continent. So, definitely, being able to resolve these conflicts will have positive effects across the board, across the region.

The farmer herder conflicts, as E.J. has mentioned, is not unique to Nigeria. Many of the pastoralists that are actually moving into Nigeria, as well, are fleeing other farmer herder conflicts or other prevailing conflicts in their individual states in the region.

So there will be positive impacts for a resolution towards this crisis. But it is trying to get to a point where the right actors can come to the table for proper dialogue. At this point, there is a lot of talking at each other and not talking in a way to think about a holistic solution to the problem.

Mr. HULTGREN: Who is driving that? You know, the language and things that are dividing it. Is it the media? Is it the entities themselves?

And, also, I guess, to kind of tag along on that, I know you wrote earlier in the year of some growing resolve of state governors wanting to address some of these conflicts and that there was some optimism there.

But I wonder if you would just talk briefly about who is driving the narrative that makes it more difficult to bring the right people to the table. But then, also, would it be

those state governors, do you think, that ought to be taking the lead, I guess, to get the right people together to find some resolution to this conflict?

Ms. ONUBOGU: I think, in many ways, from our own perspective, we see that there are a lot of narratives out there in Nigeria today about the conflict that are doing more to drive a wedge in the discussion than bring the people together. And, unfortunately, these are local stereotypes that are being perpetrated out there, where, when you do not have members of the media that have the proper skills to actually investigate properly before they report on a story, it continues to perpetuate this perception that it is purely an ethno religious conflict.

As I mentioned in my testimony, in Zamfara State in the northwest, there are actually reports that there have been larger numbers of casualties there than what we see in the Middle Belt. And these are similar pastoral conflicts.

So the governors within their individual states can do a lot to drive the message, to bring the right people together to the table. We have seen some proactive movements in Plateau State. We have seen some in Kaduna State, where the state governors in both of those states have set up peace building institutions, where they want to be able to see how they can address divisions and address crisis before it blows out of hand. Because a lot of the conflicts that we see in Nigeria really begin as localized conflicts, and when these are not handled effectively at the local level, they end up becoming catastrophic.

So the governors can do a lot at that state level. Also, civic actors, moving beyond your traditional civil society organizations. Civil society organizations are very effective, but then there are also key civic actors who are not engaged in your typical, traditional civil society organizations, but they may have served in government before, they understand the way the system works. Bringing these individuals together, being able to identify the right champions for the message at the state level can help drive and identify the right individuals.

Now, the peace building institutions that I mentioned at the state level are still at their infant stage. The institute in Plateau State is less than a year old, and the commission in Kaduna State, they have just named the new commissioners. So this creates an opportunity for engagement. This is the right time to actually begin to engage the governors that have shown the political will to actually address the problem. So there is that opportunity for engagement now.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you.

Ms. Ademola Adelehin, I wonder if I could address a couple questions to you as well. As we have heard, obviously, there are serious conflicts, but we also understand that there were conflicts, maybe, between these groups over the ages and that maybe there had been some past conflict resolution techniques that have worked to deal with previous conflicts.

Why aren't those working now? And is there anything we can do, I guess, maybe to get back to address some of the things that have worked in the past?

Ms. ADEMOLA ADELEHIN: Thank you very much.

The relationship between farmers and herders in Nigeria is [inaudible]. And I think one major thing that changed as I mentioned in my testimony, some factors affected that relationship. And as those factors also affected, it also weakened the pillars that connected herding communities and farming communities, which made the two groups to see themselves as enemies and they are supposed to be exterminated so that the group does not move forward with a particular agenda.

Different interventions have been used in response to this. I mentioned the military, which is not the best approach because it is also not for me, my assessment is more negative than positive. But the best approach that has worked in many of the communities in the Middle Belt which is working and many of the nongovernmental organizations are working is situating the response in the hands of the people in trust and also in trust of the leadership of the communities.

And when I say leadership, [inaudible] just facilitating that platform where people can talk again over the issues. Before the breakdown of relationships in the early 1970s, 1980s, and so forth on and so forth, farmers and herders used to sit down together to assess damages to crops, to assign a proper sanction. At times, the resolution could just be that if a herder [inaudible] the farm of a farmer, those crops would be destroyed. But there was the opportunity for collaboration, opportunity for discussion.

And, of course, when conflict escalates, the first thing that breaks down is the communication. The first thing that breaks down, as I said, is communication, which makes people that were friends see themselves as enemies, talking at each other, rather than talking with each other, to really find a collaborative approach to addressing the issue.

So, in what I have done and in my experience, the best approach is to bring farmers and herders together, because the solution to the problem is in the hands of the two of them. Unfortunately, the hard fact is that farmers and herders must work together, they must live together, and they must coexist peacefully to ensure food security and to ensure their communities' livelihood will continue to be ensured. So the best approach is facilitating that platform.

A lot of civil society organizations have been doing that, but I want to say there is a need for government to also [inaudible] just now that are in the infancy stage, but it is a good step forward. And civil society, like I said, you are already engaging them to see how what we do is beyond [inaudible] to what is sustainable for government to start

creating that space to facilitate discussion for communities themselves, farmers and herders, to articulate the problems and to also gently find solutions that are sustainable. So I think that is the best way forward.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thanks.

Let me ask you one more question too. Your organization has stated that this is mainly a conflict over resources, more than ethnic or religious conflict. Yet we are seeing churches are being burned; religious leaders, Christian leaders have complained that their communities are being targeted.

When do you think we reach the point where it is a tipping point where we can say that some of the causes of the attacks are no longer purely economic but are getting into some of those prejudices against religion and other things? What is your sense of when that happens? Is it happening now, or is it soon?

Ms. ADEMOLA ADELEHIN: Media contributes a lot to strengthening the narratives about the religious dimension of this conflict. And, basically, it is resource based, but it is so difficult, it is so complex, because of the other identities of the people involved in this conflict. Farmers are largely Christians; there are largely no Fulanis. Fulani herdsmen are largely Muslims. So when people see, they see it from that identity, forgetting the underlying factor.

But I hold the opinion strongly that if issues around access to these resources, if issues around destruction of crops, around encroachment of farmlands, attacks on cattle that maybe destroy crops are addressed, then the incentive for people to want to attack each other is reduced. And then the narratives around Christians attacking Muslims, Muslims attacking Christians, is also reduced.

It may be lopsided. There may be most of the victims are farmers that are Christians. But also herders that are Muslim are also being attacked by Christian communities. We can just say maybe it's lopsided, but attacks is on both sides.

But I still hold the opinion strongly, and for what my organization is doing, we don't attack the person, but we attack the issue. And what is the issue of this conflict? It is access to resources, arable land, pastoral land, water points, opening of grazing routes are reasons which are cited by different people. And these are core, tangible issues that can be seen.

And once those issues are really effectively addressed in a detached manner, not looking at the emotions or giving law or legislation that favors your own ethnic group over the other ethnic group, then addressing those concrete issues, we begin to deemphasize the incentivize for people to want to commit attacks which cannot be translated to be either religious or ethnic conflicts.

Thank you very much.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you.

Dr. Brown, a couple questions for you and then maybe one last question for everybody, if that is all right. We will try and wrap up in maybe the next 5 or 10 minutes if everybody is okay. Hopefully, that works.

I wonder if you could talk just a little about the Fulani militant groups. And from your research and study and group's efforts, is there any central organization, ideology, or leadership with the Fulani militant groups?

Mr. BROWN: This is the challenge. I mean, this is it. And it is why we disagree on the panel on, is it an organization? Is it criminality? You have folks like the Sultan of Sokoto inside Nigeria who are now sometimes referring to this conflict as foreign terrorists who are coming in and engaging in these activities.

So this is a really central question, which is why I said, at this stage, if we know I agree that attacks are happening on both sides, but it is not just a simple 51 and 49. It is so asymmetric.

I would encourage one area that this commission could explore is, the Department of State is maintaining their own numbers related to those who have been killed and where they have been killed. And I would encourage this commission to explore with the Department of State, those who have the proper security protocols to engage in those activities even the Council on Foreign Relations has indicated in the last 24 months or so, if you look at Nigeria as a whole, the greatest number of casualties remain in the northeast, in Borno. Second is Benue State.

So I am sensitive that cattle rustling happens all over Nigeria. My other sensitivity is this is where the bulk of the victims happen to be. And so that is the challenge.

The other two challenges, I would say, is many of the groups assume that there was a relative religious neutrality across the Middle Belt in the north, and now, all of a sudden, there are these competing narratives that are doing damage. The problem is, what if that assumption is wrong? What if there was already discrimination against religious minorities, and that discrimination is part of the reason why radical ideology has grown in the north?

We can't assume that, at the grassroots level, that religious freedom existed already. And our research indicates that across the Middle Belt in the north, before there was violence, there was significant discrimination against the religious minorities and that, now that violence has escalated, there remains significant discrimination against those religious minorities.

You know, here is an example. We often talk about the need to establish ranches. I am not opposed to that. What is not as frequently mentioned is, how do we compensate those from whom, often in this case going to be Christian communities, are compensated?

Our research has already indicated we have been to multiple communities where what is happening is those who are engaging in the attacks, be they criminals, be they foreign terrorists, be they militants, whichever term you want to use, they burn down the outlying hamlets, they rename that hamlet with a Fulani sounding name, and the state government will then come in and say this has always been part of their historic grazing territory, leaving those who have been displaced permanently displaced and cut out from the dialogue.

So we have to make sure that, as we engage in these processes, that we recognize religious discrimination was already occurring.

The other issue and I will end with this. I am sorry I have gone broadly on your question—

Mr. HULTGREN: Sounds good.

Mr. BROWN: --is this, that when there are still issues of a few cattle and a few crops being destroyed, some of the local mechanisms for peace seem to still be working. And when it was just those small issues, those local mechanisms for peace should be encouraged.

What we are seeing now this is what we have been suggesting is an issue where entire communities have been burned to the ground, where dozens have been killed and hundreds of homes destroyed 20,000 in Agatu displaced, according to the U.N.

In that kind of situation, to simply say we need to strengthen the local traditional mechanisms does not make the same does not have the same kind of relevance. What is needed is something new and different.

And that is where I am so grateful for the act of this commission to help ensure that Nigeria understands that we remain concerned even when we disagree with the drivers, even when we disagree with all of it, all of us share a common concern. There is a challenge, and the Nigerian Government needs to address this challenge. And so things like this continue to help them have the political will they need in order to move forward.

Mr. HULTGREN: Kind of building on that, I know your organization has recommended the Nigerian Government to take some further steps in putting programs together related to religious freedom and rule of law. I wonder if you could just talk

briefly, from your experience, again, how those are connected, why it is so important to have that legal protection of religious freedom if you are hoping to have rule of law.

Mr. BROWN: You know, I mean, they go hand in hand, as you know. In particular states, for example, where they have enacted particular versions of sharia legislation, some of those who are religious minorities feel constrained already within that. This is why acknowledging first that there is religious discrimination and that all of the violence occurs within that context is so essential.

And one of the areas that hasn't quite yet been mentioned but I think is important is that, in 2019, which may seem like a ways away, but in 2019 there is the next Presidential election. And my sense, as an outsider, is that a lot of the political will is already moving towards positioning for the 2019 Presidential election cycle and that some of — and that is where some of the energy is being drained off towards.

So I would encourage this commission, in particular, to reach out to parliamentarians at a federal level, for example, and urge the federal government to form a similar kind of commission focused on minority rights in Nigeria, whether that is religious minorities in the north or religious minorities in the south, wherever those religious minorities happen to exist. If there was a similar kind of commission within their parliament, they could begin to hold these kinds of hearings themselves.

And my sense, Congressman Hultgren, is that there is an opportunity just now to encourage. We have worked with more than a dozen members of the Nigerian National Assembly, and there is interest within the National Assembly to explore these kinds of options, which would allow them to have conversations bring together state actors and grassroots actors, Christians and Muslims, herders and farmers.

So I just would encourage you to reach out — and we would be glad to help you in that process to encourage the formation of this kind of commission.

Mr. HULTGREN: Great. We will do that. And I think I even have the opportunity in the next couple weeks where I am going to be meeting with some leaders from Nigeria that are going to be in Washington, so I am looking forward to that.

Let me wrap up with this, and maybe just a thought or two from each of you, if you have one on this. But, in your opinion, I wonder, has the State Department and USAID done enough to assist with reducing this conflict? What more could the U.S., including Congress, do? And you have given a good suggestion here, Dr. Brown. What else could the U.S. do to help Nigeria address this issue? Maybe just one or two thoughts.

Mr. HOGENDOORN: Well, one thought and let me just nuance something a little bit more, quickly. I mean, I do think that the U.S. could do more to push police reform within Nigeria. That is easier said than done, and I recognize that.

Mr. HULTGREN: I understand. Yeah.

Mr. HOGENDOORN: It is easy for me to say.

Let me just nuance the minority issue a little bit. And it is not to disagree with Dr. Brown. But one of the issues that I think is critical to appreciate is that, within the Nigerian context, there is this notion of an endogene, someone who is actually from that state. And the endogenes have more rights than so called settlers.

And this also kind of feeds on to this discrimination. And it may map on to Christian Muslim identities, but it also maps on to ethnic identities as well. It is one of the reasons why so much of the violence in Nigeria tends to be ethnic, because there are these perceptions that: We are the original people of this state, we should get most of the resources. When people come in, it is seen as a threat, and it exacerbates conflict.

That said, it is conflict that drives this wedge between communities, and it is death and destruction at the heart of these identities. And so we just have to recognize that these are spiraling and hardening positions that aren't really based on, you know, historic relations, but these are being instrumentalized oftentimes, also, by political entrepreneurs who are using this to mobilize people for their own purposes.

Thank you.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thanks.

Ms. ADEMOLA ADELEHIN: I would like to add that USAID has done a lot of work in the Middle Belt region. And I just want to say they see a lot of opportunity to consolidate the peace building processes and other supports that they have already started. It is not yet time for USAID to withdraw from the Middle Belt.

And I also say that there is a lot of opportunity for this kind of intervention that supports farmers and herders to better understand themselves, to be able to address the issues, to be expanded to the southern part of Nigeria, where an increased movement of [inaudible] is already causing a lot of destruction, a lot of attacks on communities, a lot of violent reactions by communities, not just in the Middle Belt but also to expand to those communities in the Niger Delta and the south, where a lot of violent attacks are being recorded. So that, as we are building the Middle Belt, we are not leaving the southern parts vulnerable to these issues.

Thank you.

Ms. ONUBOGU: I just want to add, as well, to what my colleagues have said that USAID and the State Department have been doing an amazing job in Nigeria, and there are still opportunities to build upon that work. And a lot of the conversations that we have been having this week with the senior working group visiting is to basically explore those opportunities to build upon the work that they are already doing in Nigeria. So there are so many more opportunities to engage.

And I just also want to add, as well, that, with Nigeria, there isn't a lack of legislation and commissions and ad hoc commissions set up to look at a lot of these issues. So I think it is important for us that, as we look at this conflict, to start taking a different approach and broadening our views as we think about solutions to addressing this, thinking that, you know, there are several — once a conflict breaks out at the state level, the national sets up an ad hoc committee of individuals who are not from that community. And they sit on that committee, and they release a report. And at the end of the day, the report will have to be implemented by the state and the local actors in the state.

So I think it is time for us to think outside the box, start thinking outside of the traditional toolboxes that we have always used to address conflict and the crisis in Nigeria, but think about how we can engage with actors that we have not traditionally engaged with, actors at the state level, civic actors, as I mentioned, who are not part of your traditional civil society groups but who have served in the military, for instance, in Nigeria, and are no longer in the military, who are part of the faith based community, who are at the universities. A lot of the universities and members from academia in Nigeria do a lot of research on these issues.

We have to tap into those local experiences. We have to tap into the local knowledge that is available in Nigeria for us to be able to think outside the box to really find a sustainable solution to this crisis.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you.

Mr. BROWN: Let me just add very, very quickly: rule of law. If the Nigerian Government wants to send a signal that its commitment to the rule of law is going to be strong, two very quick steps: Hold people accountable. There is often, in all of these cases, from both sides, nobody arrested, nobody tried, nobody sent to court. It is hard to say that there is going to be judicial, well established peace until that happens.

Number two, communities that have already been attacked or who have engaged in attacking, make sure that there are security forces, such as the police, placed there. Those two things, I think, to the minority communities, if they began to see people held accountable and if they began to know a security force is present, would begin to send a signal that we can now go back and begin to build upon our traditional mechanisms of peace and to resolve and we won't be overrun.

Mr. HULTGREN: Thank you all. We very much appreciate your time and your work. We do want to stay in touch to know how we can be helpful, ultimately, to restore peace and save lives and property in this very important region. So thank you very much for being here.

With that, the Commission hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:42 p.m., the Commission was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE HEARING RECORD



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Hearing Notice

Nigeria: Conflict in the Middle Belt

Wednesday, September 27, 2017

2:00-3:30 PM

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Please join the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for a **hearing** on the ongoing inter-communal conflict between predominately Muslim cattle-herding nomadic groups and mostly Christian settled farming populations in Nigeria's Middle Belt.

Communities in Central Nigeria are engaged in an increasingly violent and complex conflict that cost the economy more than \$14 billion from 2012-2015. It is estimated more than 1,200 people lost their lives in 2014, and deadly attacks have continued with more than 100 casualties in just one attack alone earlier this year. As farmers abandon their fields and Fulani herdsman reroute their livestock to avoid Boko Haram militants, herdsman clash with farmers, and farmers launch reprisal attacks. This cycle of violence has led to loss of life, less planting and the reduction of crop output. While this situation affects over half the country, its more diffuse nature has led to less international press coverage and world-wide attention.

This hearing will examine the international community's role in helping the Nigerian government address these violent attacks and widespread human rights abuses. Has this inter-communal violence over resources begun to take on ethnic and/or religious dynamics? How is the Nigerian government responding to this conflict? Furthermore, what strategies are effectively addressing the drivers of the conflict and the multiple human rights violations? Witnesses will present testimony on the human rights challenges in the Middle Belt, and will explore possible solutions.

Panel

- **EJ Hogendoorn**, Deputy Program Director, Africa, International Crisis Group

- **Oge Onubogu**, Senior Program Officer for Africa Programs, United States Institute of Peace
- **Olubukola Ademola-Adelehin**, Conflict Analyst, Nigeria, Search for Common Ground
- **Elijah Brown**, Executive Director, 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative

This hearing is open to Members of Congress, congressional staff, the interested public, and the media. The hearing will be livestreamed via YouTube on the Commission website, <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/>. For any questions, please contact Matthew Singer (for Mr. Hultgren) at 202-226-3989 or Matthew.Singer@mail.house.gov or Kimberly Stanton (for Mr. McGovern) at 202-225-3599 or Kimberly.Stanton@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely,

Randy Hultgren, M.C.
Co-Chair, TLHRC

James P. McGovern, M.C.
Co-Chair, TLHRC

**PREPARED STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE TRENT FRANKS, A
REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF ARIZONA AND A
MEMBER OF THE TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

Statement of Representative Trent Franks
Executive Committee Member of the Tom Lantos Human
Rights Commission
on September 27, 2017
Nigeria: Conflict in the Middle Belt

I commend the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for holding a hearing on the complex conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt Region. I organized a hearing to awaken Congress to the deteriorating security in Nigeria because of growing religious conflict just months before a Nigerian man known as the Underwear Bomber tried to attack America. Sadly, nearly ten years later, we must meet again. It is my hope that the panelists here today will provide an honest assessment of the situation and their own programming challenges, as well as recommendations for how we can make progress going forward.

Nigeria now stands at a critical juncture, both politically and socially, and its trajectory in the coming months and years will ultimately determine its role on the African continent. With a booming population, Nigeria is poised to become one of the most populous countries in the world by 2050. But this is a double-edged sword. Currently, the country is nearly evenly split between Christians and Muslims and is in a unique position to model pluralism and peaceful coexistence for other countries in the region. However, we must act soon because tensions in the north, which is predominately Muslim and becoming increasingly radicalized, could threaten Nigeria's role as a model for the region.

The northeastern region of the country has become a hotbed for radicalization and violent extremism in the region. Boko Haram, who gained notoriety when the terrorist organization kidnapped over 200 Chibok girls from their school in 2014, continues to destabilize the country. Al-Qaeda East Africa is also growing in the region. Nigerians have become increasingly weary of their government's inability to address these challenges. Government responses have been insufficient and – at times – counter-productive as they have exacerbated tensions along religious lines. Horrific attacks targeting Christian communities in the north is creating a hostile environment for many. At the same time, recurring conflict between Christians and Muslims continues to deteriorate the social fabric of the country.

In the past, reports on the violence have been limited. This has made it difficult to assess the problem and led many to misinterpret the situation as merely an ethnic conflict, negating the clear religious dimension that exists. As a result of this lack of adequate reporting, I am concerned that the US Government is not prioritizing policy and funding where it is most needed – in building

local leadership and public support for religious freedom among both Muslim and Christian and indigenous communities. Moreover, the lack of reporting has meant that persecutors have not been held to account and a climate of impunity has exacerbated the problem.

My former staff recently returned from Nigeria. They now work for an organization, Hardwired Global, that works with religious and civil society leaders across the north part of Nigeria to address ongoing religion-related violence and persecution in the region. These leaders are forming networks in each northern state to educate their communities on their rights and report on violations of the right to religious freedom. Christians in the north have reported on several violations against their communities, which include:

- discrimination in employment and political appointments
- abduction and forced marriages
- destruction of church buildings and media stations
- prosecution in sharia courts without the legally required formal written consent
- communal violence and attacks

My former staff have reported how leaders from the north recognize the religious tensions and its implications for their communities, and expressed many common fears and challenges that can be overcome through education. However, most communities in the north are unaware of their rights – both in the Constitution and in their local laws. Most leaders my former staff met with are uncertain of their government’s political will to protect their fundamental rights and have no idea how to access justice when their rights are violated. Fears and misconceptions between religious communities fuel tensions and intolerance.

After a recent Hardwired training, one Christian pastor in the north shared, “I learned I was born with rights. This right is inherent because I am human.” Another shared, “To protect my rights, I must speak up. We cannot remain quiet.”

While religious freedom is guaranteed in the Nigerian Constitution, measures to uphold this right in cities and villages across the north are falling short or non-existent. Some states uphold problematic laws in their penal code, which was modelled after the penal codes of Pakistan and Sudan, which challenge the right to religious freedom. In many cases, religion-related violence is often excused by officials as politically, ethnically, or tribally motivated. Consequently, this systemic problem facing millions of Nigerians remains largely unacknowledged or discounted by Nigeria’s political leaders.

This laissez-faire attitude towards persecution has fostered a culture of impunity in which citizens discriminate against, oppress or attack their neighbors because their religion. Nigerians whose rights are violated lack confidence in the legal framework for justice and accountability. Many are unsure of how to access justice or protect their rights, or whether the government has the capacity to ensure their rights at all.

We are witness to increasing tensions within families, neighborhoods, villages, communities, states, and the entire country of Nigeria. While political, ethnic and tribal differences contributors

to these tensions, we would be remiss to acknowledge the religious dimension of the conflict, which manifests itself in mistrust, discrimination, marginalization, and violence.

It is my hope that the information shared in this hearing will motivate and mobilize this Congress to consider strategic opportunities through which we can encourage the government of Nigeria to: protect the rights of its citizens, which are enshrined in the Constitution; promote discourse and cooperation across among all sectors in society; ensure justice and accountability for perpetrators of violations; and promote laws and policies through which Nigeria can assume a position of regional leadership rather than regional turmoil.
