

Statement of Representative Trent Franks
Executive Committee Member of the Tom Lantos Human
Rights Commission
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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.