

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 10, 2000

Contact:

Lawrence J. Goodrich, Communications Director, (202) 523-3240

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom wrote to President Clinton August 8 urging that he raise with President Obasanjo of Nigeria "the need for his government to preserve religious liberty for all Nigerians." President Clinton will undertake a state visit to Nigeria on August 25-27. The Commission is concerned by a wave of violence between Christians and Muslims during recent months fostered by the attempts of several northern Nigerian states to adopt Islamic criminal law and impose it on non-Muslims. The violence has "claimed hundreds of lives, displaced thousands, and destroyed many places of worship, homes and businesses," the Commission noted. The text of the letter follows:

August 8, 2000

The Honorable William J. Clinton
President of the United States of America
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Presidential Visit to Nigeria, August 25-27, 2000

Dear Mr. President,

We were pleased to learn that you will be making a state visit to Nigeria on August 25-27, 2000 to meet with Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo. According to the White House statement, the purpose of the visit is to "underscore [U.S.] support for Nigeria's impressive democratic transformation under President Obasanjo's government and for Nigeria's leadership role in the region."

On behalf of the U.S. Commission On International Religious Freedom, I urge you to raise with President Obasanjo the need for his government to preserve religious liberty for all Nigerians. A number of northern states have adopted, or proposed the adoption of, Islamic criminal law and sought to impose it on non-Muslims. These proposals are opposed --

sometimes violently -- by non-Muslims throughout Nigeria. The result has been a wave of violence between Muslims and Christians since February of this year that has claimed hundreds of lives, displaced thousands, and destroyed many places of worship, homes and businesses. It appears that there has been deliberate targeting of Christians and their institutions based solely on their religious affiliation; these attacks have triggered reprisals against Muslims in southern states. This strife threatens to halt the progress of democratic transformation, and to destabilize the country and the surrounding West African region.

President Obasanjo's government has as you know taken some steps to prevent further violence and diffuse the crisis, but with limited success. He has spoken out publicly against both the violence and the recent announcement that Islamic law would be implemented in Kano state (despite an earlier agreement by the National Council of States to suspend implementation of Islamic law in northern states). An increased presence of security forces has been established in areas where violence can occur. Muslim and Christian religious leaders have also spoken out against the violence. However, President Obasanjo's government has been unable to check the violence and bring the perpetrators to justice. More fundamentally, the federal government has not challenged the imposition of Islamic law on non-Muslims, which lies at the heart of the problem.

The Commission respectfully recommends that you impress on President Obasanjo the high priority that our government will continue to place on religious freedom in its relations with Nigeria. We ask that you urge President Obasanjo to do all he can to restore order and to ensure that the application of religious law anywhere in the country be done in consonance with the federal constitution's separation of church and state and with international covenants of human rights. It may indeed be difficult to balance respect for the law-making authority of Nigerian states, the right of non-Muslims to speak out on important issues such as the implementation of Islamic law, and the need to prevent outbreaks of violence. However, the willingness to do so will be indicative of the commitment of President Obasanjo's government, and the Nigerian people, to democracy, human rights and religious freedom. We hope that your visit to Nigeria provides an occasion for a serious discussion of religious freedom and communal violence in Nigeria.

Respectfully,

Elliott Abrams
Chairman

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Hon. Elliott Abrams
- Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh