

**Opening Remarks, Vice Chair Michael Cromartie, U.S. Commission
on International Religious Freedom
Opportunities and Challenges for Stemming Nigeria’s Religious
Violence
Wednesday, April 22, 2009, 4:30 – 5:30 PM
Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2358 C**

Good afternoon. My name is Michael Cromartie and I am the Vice Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. The Commission is an independent, official U.S. Government commission created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor religious freedom worldwide and to provide policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and to the Congress on ways in which American foreign policy can better protect and promote religious freedom globally.

One way we help monitor and address religious freedom is to conduct briefings like this on Capitol Hill, and we thank you for coming today to this briefing titled, “Opportunities and Challenges for Stemming Nigeria’s Religious Violence.”

We are very fortunate to have with us two outstanding leaders from Nigeria, His Eminence Muhammed Sa’ad Abubakar III [Muhammed-Sod- abu-bah-car the Third], the Sultan of Sokoto [So-ko-toe], and His

Grace the Archbishop of Abuja [Ah-boo-ja], Rev. Dr. John Onaiyekan [On-yi-kan].

The Sultan is widely recognized as being the spiritual leader of Nigeria's Muslim community. Prior to his becoming Sultan, His Eminence was a brigadier general in Nigeria's army and he has held various military commands, ranging from commanding peacekeeping forces in West Africa to being military attaché to Pakistan.

Archbishop Onaiyekan[On-yi-kan], in addition to his significant duties as the Roman Catholic Bishop of Nigeria's capital city, Abuja [Ah-boo-ja], was recently elected as President of the Christian Association of Nigeria, the predominant umbrella organization representing all of Nigeria's Christian community, including Roman Catholic, Protestant - evangelical, Pentecostal, and indigenous Christian communities.

Together, it can be said, these two figures represent many of the faithful in Nigeria. Sirs, having heard about the religious dynamism in Nigeria, you have an awesome responsibility.

Recognizing the importance of relations between these communities, in 1999 the Nigerian government created the Nigeria Inter Religious Council or NIREC, and the Sultan and the Archbishop are currently co-chairs of this council. NIREC was formed as a platform for dialogue between Muslim and Christian leaders and is comprised of 25 leaders

from each faith tradition. Traditionally, the Sultan of Sokoto [So-kotoe] and the President of the Christian Association of Nigeria have served as co-chairs of NIREC. With the assumption of the current Sultan and the Archbishop to co-chairmen of NIREC, the council has reportedly been re-invigorated, and I'm told these two men have been very proactive in peace and reconciliation efforts throughout Nigeria. We look forward to hearing about the changes they have brought to NIREC and their vision for the future of NIREC.

And yet, as Nigeria's recent history indicates, tensions between Muslim and Christian communities in the country still exist. Despite the best efforts and intentions of such fine leaders as we have here today, episodic sectarian violence and atrocities still occur. This was most recently seen on a massive scale in the Nigerian city of Jos, where in November, 2008 anywhere from several hundred to as many as 3,000 were killed, and numerous churches, mosques, and other buildings were burned.

Our Commission recently visited Nigeria and some of our views from that trip will be reflected in the release of our annual report next Friday, May 1. We met survivors and eyewitnesses to this violence. We saw the burnt churches and mosques. And our Commission has been concerned about what appears to be a rising tensions between faith communities and the continued failure of the Nigerian Government to

hold perpetrators of violence accountable. Since 1999, virtually no one has been prosecuted or convicted for the numerous bouts of communal and sectarian violence that have erupted.

Due to its persistent concerns about continuing violent communal conflicts along religious lines in which more than 12,000 people have been killed since 1999, the Commission has retained Nigeria on its Watch List since 2002, when it was created.

As many of you know, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and one of the few countries in the world with such a large, and almost equal Muslim and Christian population. Few nations have a similar composition, which makes relations between these two great faith traditions even more important.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are honored to have two such distinguished leaders with us today, and we look forward to hearing about the opportunities and challenges you and your country face in addressing the recurring sectarian violence. Your views on the ways forward, and the ongoing dynamics between the Muslim and Christian community in Nigeria, will be very useful. The audience will also benefit from hearing about your efforts to reinvigorate the Nigeria Inter Religious Council and about your outstanding leadership with the Council.

We would appreciate approximately ten – fifteen minutes of comments from each of you and then we can have a moderated question and answer session with the audience and Commissioners.

Please join me in welcoming the Sultan of Sokoto [So-ko-toe] and Archbishop Onaiyekan [On-yi-kan].