

May 25, 2004: Nigeria: Address Sectarian Violence

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) strongly condemns the recent sectarian violence in Plateau and Kano states, which has claimed hundreds of lives since the beginning of this month. The popular movement since 1999 in several northern Nigerian states to expand the legal application of Sharia to criminal matters has exacerbated sectarian and communal violence and is a source of continuing volatility and tension between Muslims and Christians at both the national and local levels. The response of the government of Nigeria to these persistent outbreaks of violence and to the protection of freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief in Nigeria continues to be inadequate. Since February, some have estimated that nearly 1000 Nigerians have been killed in the small town of Yelwa in Plateau state as a result of the massacre of a Muslim tribe by a predominantly Christian tribe over land issues. This has led to a series of reprisal attacks against Christians in Yelwa and elsewhere in Plateau state and spread to Kano, displacing thousands. Last week, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo declared a state of emergency in Plateau state and suspended the Governor for being "weak and incompetent." He has since appointed a retired general, Chris Alli, to serve for six months. The Commission acknowledges Alli's initial action to engage in the situation but notes that far more needs to be done to contain the sectarian violence. "Over the past five years, state and local intervention in the communal and sectarian violence in Nigeria has been inadequate and has, in some cases, exacerbated sectarian tensions," said USCIRF Chair Michael K. Young. "The U.S. government should urge the Nigerian government to take effective steps to prevent and contain acts of sectarian and communal violence, prevent reprisal attacks, and bring those responsible for such violence to justice. While many Christians and Muslims have been identified as perpetrators of violence over the years, very few, if any, have been prosecuted. Furthermore, the Nigerian federal police and military have been accused of using excessive force to curb the violence, including extrajudicial killings. The U.S. government should work with other donor governments to ensure that Nigerian security forces receive adequate training, particularly respect for human rights." Serious outbreaks of Muslim-Christian violence that have resulted in more than 10,000 deaths in the last few years threaten to divide further the populace along religious lines and undermine the foundations of freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief in Nigeria. President Obasanjo has been criticized both inside and outside Nigeria for not responding more decisively to the religious violence and communal tensions. He has primarily played a mediating role, stressing political negotiations rather than ordering the government to intervene to protect the lives of Nigerian citizens and to meet his obligations as the elected president of a democratic state. The Commission urges the U.S. government to press President Obasanjo to expand efforts by the Nigerian government to address this issue in order to prevent further killings and to advance protections of the constitutionally guaranteed human rights, including religious freedom, of all Nigerian citizens. The U.S. government should also urge the Nigerian government to examine the impact of Sharia in exacerbating the sectarian violence. Moreover, the U.S. government should support efforts by the Nigerian government and non-governmental organizations by increasing U.S. support and funding of foreign assistance programs, such as the promotion of conflict management and mitigation at the local and state levels.

Dean Michael K. Young, Chair

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