

Dec. 3, 2008: Nigeria: USCIRF Deeply Concerned by Deaths and Ethnic Violence, Calls for Swift Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible

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WASHINGTON—The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom is deeply concerned by reports of the sectarian and ethnic violence in Jos, central Nigeria, that reportedly has resulted in the killing or wounding of several hundred people and the apparent displacement of more than 10,000 from their homes, according to initial news accounts. The Commission calls on the U.S. government to urge the Nigerian government to launch an immediate and independent investigation of the clashes that broke out between Muslims and Christians following local elections and to prosecute those found to be perpetrators.

“Without a swift, firm government declaration to demand an end to such violence and actions to investigate and implement preventive measures to head off such unrest in the future, Nigerians will remain vulnerable to more deadly conflict,” said Felice D. Gaer, Chair of the Commission. “But this must end.”

Since 2002, Nigeria has been on the Commission’s Watch List, a group of countries that merit close monitoring because of a significant pattern of restrictions on religious freedom. Since 1999, more than 10,000 Nigerians reportedly have been killed in sectarian and communal attacks and reprisals between Muslims and Christians. The response of the government to such violence, particularly bringing perpetrators to justice, continues to remain inadequate. This, too, merits immediate action by the federal government in Nigeria.

The number of deaths resulting from sectarian violence reportedly had decreased over the past few years, due in part to a more rapid and effective response by Nigerian security forces, but the latest outbreak has reversed that trend. There have been disturbing reports of foreign Islamic extremists, particularly from neighboring Niger and Chad, participating in the violence in Jos, which is consistent with the reports of foreign sources of funding and support for Islamic extremist activities in northern Nigeria. Many Muslims and Christians have been identified as perpetrators of violence in past years, but very few, if any, have been prosecuted.

“The Commission has long called for expanded U.S. support for communal conflict prevention and mitigation in Nigeria,” Gaer said. “The first steps, though, must come from the Nigerian government, which is obligated to restore respect for religious freedom and associated rights and to punish perpetrators of extremist activity.”