

## 7/30/09: USCIRF Sends Letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Africa Visit

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 30, 2009

WASHINGTON, D.C. &ndash; USCIRF sent the following letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on her Africa visit.

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July 30, 2009

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

U.S. Department of State

2201 C Street, N.W.

Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton,

As you embark on your trip to Africa, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) asks that you raise religious freedom issues during your bilateral discussions with officials from Nigeria and Somalia. USCIRF is an independent U.S. government commission established by Congress to monitor religious freedom worldwide and make policy recommendations to the executive and legislative branches.

Recognizing Nigeria's strategic importance to the United States and to Africa, USCIRF has long been concerned with the recurrent episodes of communal and sectarian violence, the expansion of sharia law into the criminal codes of several northern Nigerian states, and discrimination against minority communities of Christians and Muslims. USCIRF traveled to Nigeria in March 2009 to further examine these issues, subsequently recommending for the first time that Nigeria be designated as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

USCIRF concluded that the government of Nigeria has done little to prevent sectarian violence and that there have been no serious efforts to investigate or prosecute the perpetrators of the numerous sectarian killings and crimes that have occurred over the past ten years, most recently in Bauchi (February 2009) and Jos (November 2008). Well over 12,000 people have been killed in communal violence in Nigeria since 1999 and sectarian tensions, exacerbated by inadequate government prevention and response, threaten to further destabilize the country.

Sadly, in the months following USCIRF's CPC determination, there has been further evidence of sectarian violence, underscoring the need for the Nigerian government to prevent violent incidents before they occur. Numerous news agencies have reported that Muslim rebels demanding a stricter adoption of sharia law in all of Nigeria have been attacking security forces, reporting over 300 dead at this point in the crisis. A senior leader of the rebel group has threatened further attacks as a means of achieving its goal of introducing sharia law more deeply and broadly into Nigeria. As you said in your remarks with Pakistani Foreign Minister Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi in Phuket, Thailand, it is vital that the United States stand with those who oppose violent extremism and we urge you to discuss further avenues of cooperation between the United States and Nigeria, including USCIRF's recommendations on this issue. In particular, the United States should urge the Nigerian government to ensure that sharia codes, as applied, comply with international human rights standards with regard to every individual's right to due process of law, equal treatment of law, freedom of expression, and freedom of religion or belief, including freedom from prosecution and reprisals for blasphemy and apostasy.

The severe violations of religious freedom and sectarian violence in Nigeria must be addressed for that country to realize lasting progress, security, and prosperity as a democracy. However, to end the cycle of impunity and the needless deaths and destruction, the will of the Nigerian government to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of sectarian violence must be bolstered. We urge you to raise these concerns and to discuss the attached recommendations in your conversations with Nigerian officials.

USCIRF also urges you to raise issues of freedom of religion or belief when you meet with Somali President Sheik Sharif Ahmed in Nairobi. For the first time, USCIRF placed Somalia on its Watch List in 2009, finding that in the absence of the rule of law, freedom of religion or belief, like all other human rights, is circumscribed by insurgents, warlords, self-appointed officials, local authorities, and prevailing societal attitudes. While the international community is focused on piracy, terrorism, and the security situation in Somalia, problems of religious extremism and the rule of law must also be addressed. USCIRF believes that improving freedom of religion and related human rights and governance will help to address many of the problems in Somalia.

We also urge you to raise with President Sharif the unresolved issue of the implementation of sharia law in Somalia. We ask that you communicate to President Sharif that Somali legal institutions and systems must respect universal human rights, including the individual's right to freedom of religion or belief in both the public and private spheres. This past spring, President Sheik Sharif announced that Islamic law, or sharia law, would be the basis for law in Somalia; this was subsequently unanimously approved by the Transitional Federal Parliament. However, other than a few statements by President Sheik Sharif that sharia law in Somalia would respect human rights, no further concrete information has been provided as to how it would be implemented in the country. In some areas controlled by the Islamic militia al-Shabaab, that group's sharia court rulings have implemented the harshest of sharia punishments, including amputations and stoning, without proper due process of law. It must be made clear that such punishments violate universal human rights standards and are unacceptable.

While Somalis have traditionally practiced a Sufi-influenced version of Islam, Islamic militants groups are increasingly forcing implementation of their more radical social and religious norms on Somali society. Islamic militants have attacked Sufi clerics, students, and mosques. USCIRF believes that your meeting in Nairobi is an appropriate venue to discuss with President Sheik Sharif efforts to ensure that all religious communities are treated equally, that religious freedom and related human rights are protected in a new Somali constitution, and that education programs to limit religious extremism and promote religious tolerance are expanded.

Thank you for your consideration of these important issues. We wish you a safe and productive journey.

Sincerely,

Leonard Leo

Chair

CC: Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson

[Click here to view USCIRF's recommendations for U.S. policy on Nigeria.](#)