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WASHINGTON, D.C. – As Nigeria assumes the presidency of the UN Security Council today, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) expresses its continuing concern about the horrific sectarian violence that has wracked Nigeria for over a decade and the Nigerian government's culture of impunity, which, significantly, includes a longstanding failure to prosecute and convict the perpetrators of that violence.

"The UN Security Council has the critical task of addressing issues of international peace and security, and we congratulate Nigeria, one of our most important allies in Africa, for assuming the important role of Security Council President for the month of July," said Chairman Leonard Leo. "Unfortunately, Nigeria's own security and stability is put at risk by a culture of unchecked and unpunished sectarian violence that gives rise to divisiveness along religious lines and repeated reprisal attacks. Nigeria has the ability to prosecute perpetrators of sectarian violence, but so far lacks political will and determination to actually do so."

USCIRF urges the Obama Administration, and other governments serving on the UN Security Council, to use all available diplomatic tools to address these issues more effectively bilaterally and multilaterally. This should include the U.S. State Department making issues of sectarian violence a key feature of the discussions to take place within the recently formed U.S.–Nigeria Binational Commission.

USCIRF delegations have visited Nigeria three times since March 2009 to assess conditions on the ground and determine whether to continue to recommend to the Administration and Congress that Nigeria be designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC).

In and around the northern community of Jos at least 500 people have been killed in sectarian violence since the start of this year. More than 13,000 Nigerians have been murdered since 1999 and not a single person has been held accountable.

"Nigerian officials are quick to argue that this violence and extremism is not about religion but instead the by-product of tribal or ethnic tensions as well as economic disparities. This sort of denial is making matters only worse. The Nigerian government has the capacity but not the will to protect its citizens," said Chairman Leo.

USCIRF has recommended in its most recent annual report that Nigeria be designated a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, which was passed to promote religious freedom as a U.S. foreign policy. USCIRF has strongly supported more effective law enforcement, conflict mitigation, and prosecutorial activity within Nigeria that comports with international human rights standards.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at [tcarter@uscirf.gov](mailto:tcarter@uscirf.gov), or (202) 523-3257