

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Washington, DC - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today expressed grave concern over the latest outbreak of sectarian religious violence in Nigeria and renewed its call for the Nigerian government to investigate, prosecute, and punish such crimes and those responsible for them. The recent violence included the Christmas Eve attacks on churches in the city of Maiduguri apparently by Muslim militants from the extremist organization Boko Haram, killing a pastor and others in the vicinity of churches, as well as bombings in a crowded marketplace in the city of Jos, which killed 32 people, while injuring at least seventy. These latest assaults were followed by what appeared to be retributive violence in Jos which raised the death toll higher.

“The Commission strongly condemns the unconscionable Christmas Eve attacks on innocent worshippers in Nigeria and the violence that followed these vicious atrocities,” said USCIRF Chairman Leonard Leo. “In response to today’s volatile climate in the affected areas, Nigeria’s security forces must act decisively but responsibly to restore calm. But that isn’t enough. We call on Nigeria’s government to bring all perpetrators of sectarian violence, past and present, to justice. To date, the government has failed to address fully the culture of impunity surrounding the ongoing violence, which is why, for the past two years, USCIRF has recommended that Nigeria be officially designated a country of particular concern.”

This past spring, USCIRF had commended the government of Nigeria for having instituted, for the first time in over 10 years of sectarian clashes, 41 prosecutions against some of the perpetrators of violence that occurred in and around Jos in early 2010. But there has been no progress in seeing these prosecutions to a conclusion.

“It’s most unfortunate, but far from surprising, that sectarian violence would continue unabated in light of the fact that, time and again, the Nigerian government has signaled that there will be no cost to such lawlessness,” Mr. Leo observed. “If Nigeria wants to keep extremism from its communities, then it needs to get serious about combating impunity.”

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.

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