

The International Religious Freedom Caucus

Briefing on

Prospects for Justice in Northern and Central Nigeria:
Government Responses to Religious Extremism and Root Causes

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Statement of

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today on the religious freedom situation in Nigeria. My name is Leonard Leo and I currently serve as Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan U.S. government commission established by Congress to monitor religious freedom worldwide and make policy recommendations to the executive and legislative branches.

I most recently visited Nigeria in March, 2009, when I led a Commission delegation to this strategically important country. We travelled to the cities of Abuja, Kaduna, Kano, and Bauchi city, meeting with government officials, Muslim and Christian religious leaders, and representatives from civil society. It was an eye opening trip.

The Commission 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. On May 1, under the auspices of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, USCIRF recommended that Nigeria be named as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC), a category designated for egregious abusers of religious freedom, which includes the concept of gross failure to act to prevent severe violations.

Unfortunately, this past July, only two months after the Commission recommended the CPC designation, reportedly over 2,000 people were killed when the extremist Muslim sect Boko Haram demanded an even harsher implementation of sharia law in Nigeria and attacked Christians and police officers in a few northern States after police arrested several members of the sect. Numerous churches were burned, and unconfirmed reports indicate that at least three Christian pastors were murdered. There also are reports that over 100 people have been arrested for their role in the violence or for membership in this group, but it is too early to tell if the Government of Nigeria will actually prosecute and convict any perpetrators of violence. The track record to date on the government investigating or prosecuting perpetrators of sectarian killings and other crimes is very concerning.

What we do know is that some arrests and arraignments appear to be occurring, but there is widespread frustration at and many questions about the government’s handling of the violence. Criticism has been abundant in the news media, in a public statement by the director of Nigeria’s internal security service, and most recently in remarks made by the Catholic Bishops Conference, as well as others. The key lines of questioning include: how the government failed to prevent the violence, why the government allowed the sect to exist given its violent past, and why and by whom the head of the sect was killed.

The Boko Haram violence came on the heels of another sectarian-based outbreak that occurred in Bauchi in February 2009 when reportedly upwards of twenty people were killed, places of worship burned, and thousands were temporarily displaced, presumably over an argument over who could park in a church parking lot. The much larger incident

occurred just a few months before, in November 2008, in the city of Jos. Here, there was mass destruction. Churches and mosques were burned to the ground. Reports claim that from several hundred to over 3,000 people were killed. Hundreds of automobiles were torched. The remnants of this destruction were evident when our staff drove through Jos in March. There they saw the mosques and the churches that were simply torched and examined the charred remains of a Methodist church that used to seat over 500 people.

Since 1999, well over 14,000 people have been killed in communal violence largely due to sectarian tensions exacerbated by inadequate government prevention and response. Yet, to our knowledge, no one has been prosecuted and convicted for any of the sectarian violence over the past several years. This was a major basis for the Commission recommending that Nigeria be named as a CPC.

Order was eventually restored following the Boko Haram generated violence in July, but another chapter in sectarian strife has been opened. How many more times is this violence going to occur in Nigeria? And will the government take serious steps to prevent any reoccurrences? These outbreaks clearly threaten to destabilize the country. The danger for Nigeria is where these chapters are leading. Nigeria is an important U.S. ally. USCIRF is reaching out to government officials in an effort to effectively address and change the current culture of impunity and corruption, and end the recurrent episodes of sectarian violence.

Nigeria is vitally important because it sits directly on the Muslim-Christian divide, with major implications for the global war on terror. The decade long spate of sectarian violence apparently has been fueled in part by the imposition of sharia law into the penal codes of many northern Nigerian states, leaving many Christians and other non-Muslims in northern states to feel like second class citizens in their own towns and villages.

Nigeria also faces serious problems with corruption. Transparency International ranked Nigeria as the 121st most corrupt nation out of 160, with a score of just 2.7 out of 10, in a survey detailing corruption and abuse by public officials and politicians.

Yet Nigeria is vital to U.S. interests for many reasons, among them that it provides the United States with a major dose of its daily oil requirements. Nigeria ranks number five among U.S. oil providers – behind Canada, Mexico, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela.

It is out of deep concern for a friend that we recommend Nigeria be designated a CPC. In advance of Secretary Clinton's trip to Nigeria, I wrote to her on July 30th on behalf of USCIRF asking her to raise deep concern about the recurrent sectarian strife. I asked her to offer technical assistance to Nigeria that could help quell further religiously motivated violence, such as bolstering the preventative and non-lethal capabilities of the Nigerian police and security forces and offering legal expertise in dealing with human rights and religious rights violations.

Because these religious freedom matters are of such grave importance, the Commission is planning to return to Nigeria in the very near future. Our purpose is to engage in candid,

and we hope productive, conversations with the top Nigerian officials who have jurisdiction over the prevention and prosecution of sectarian violence and urge them to end the culture of impunity and take actions against the perpetrators.

The Commission has a number of recommendations for U.S. policy toward Nigeria that can be found on our website at www.uscirf.gov. These recommendations include expanding U.S. support for communal conflict prevention and mitigation; urging the Nigerian government to oppose religious extremism; and expanding the U.S. presence and outreach efforts, primarily in Northern Nigeria.

We are looking forward to discussing these recommendations with U.S. Government officials as well as with Nigerian officials and learning how the U.S. can help a strong ally address the recurring, destabilizing outbreaks of sectarian violence.