



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Freedom in Nigeria: Extremism and Government Inaction

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Anurima Bhargava, USCIRF Chair

Good morning and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing today on *Religious Freedom in Nigeria:*

Extremism and Government Inaction. I would like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international

standards to monitor the freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

USCIRF has monitored religious freedom conditions in Nigeria for two decades, and since 2009 has recommended the Secretary of State designate Nigeria a country of particular concern, or CPC, for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. Unfortunately, conditions continue to deteriorate for Nigerians seeking to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief.

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, home to nearly 220 million people. Nigeria has tremendous religious diversity – with approximately half the population identifying as Muslim and nearly half identifying as Christian. Nigerian nationals also express Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Baha'i, and atheist beliefs, among others. While the Nigerian constitution, adopted in 1999 during the country's transition to democratic rule, protects freedom of religion for all citizens, in practice many Nigerians face opposition in exercising this right.

In December then Secretary of State Pompeo designated Nigeria a country of particular concern for the first time. Nigeria is the first secular democracy to have received this designation from the Department of State.

I will now turn it over to Vice Chair Perkins to discuss some of the religious freedom challenges in Nigeria that bring us together today for this hearing.