

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Nigeria deteriorated, with both state and nonstate actors committing egregious violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief. Despite Nigeria's constitution protecting freedom of religion and belief, Nigerian citizens faced violence by militant Islamists and other nonstate armed actors, as well as discrimination, arbitrary detentions, and capital blasphemy sentences by state authorities.

State-sanctioned Shari'a courts handed down [harsh sentences](#) on several individuals convicted of blasphemy, including sentencing [22-year-old musician Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#) to death, although a higher court later demanded Sharif-Aminu's case to be retried. Government authorities also arrested prominent humanist activist [Mubarak Bala](#), reportedly in relation to his expression of his humanist beliefs on social media. Bala continues to be detained without charge, and authorities have restricted his access to his legal team.

Militant Islamist groups in Nigeria continued to violate religious freedom in the northeast and expanded to parts of the northwest of the country. Elements from Boko Haram and from the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) abducted and executed several individuals based on their religious beliefs. Boko Haram fighters

[beheaded a local chairman](#) of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in Adamawa State because he refused to renounce his faith, while ISWAP fighters [executed five aid workers](#) as a warning to "all those being used by infidels to convert Muslims to Christianity." Jihadists also conducted several attacks on religious ceremonies: in May they [attacked villagers](#) preparing to break their Ramadan fast, killing 20 people, and in July they [attacked locals](#) gathering to celebrate Eid al-Adha in Maiduguri.

In the center of the country, other nonstate armed groups also conducted attacks on houses of worship, religious ceremonies, and religious leaders. Christian communities were hit particularly hard in the country's Middle Belt, with nonstate armed actors attacking at least [11 churches](#) and [Christian ceremonies](#). Survivors report that Fulani-affiliated armed groups used [religious rhetoric](#) while conducting myriad attacks on predominantly Christian villages in Kaduna State. Kidnappers also reportedly [deliberately targeted Christians](#) for abduction and execution. The Nigerian government has routinely failed to investigate these attacks and prosecute those responsible, demonstrating a problematic level of apathy on the part of state officials.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Nigeria as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and redesignate Boko Haram and ISWAP as "entities of particular concern," or EPCs, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
- Enter into a binding agreement, as authorized under Section 405(c) of IRFA, and provide associated financial and technical support to obligate the Nigerian government to take substantial steps to address religious freedom violations, including but not limited to:
 - Enhance training for officials, the military, and police officers on countering hate speech based on religious identity, responding to sectarian violence, reporting on violence against religious communities, and holding accountable security officers accused of excessive use of force and other human rights abuses;
 - Promote and expand access to justice and strengthen secular courts in areas where ethnoreligious tensions overlap with trends of heightened violence, criminality, and mob justice;
 - Increase funding for security sector reform and rule of law programming and include religious institutional actors in security and justice programs; and
 - Allocate funding for programs that engage civil society, security, and official actors in inclusive efforts to protect places of worship and other holy sites;
- Conduct a comprehensive review of all U.S. aid to Nigeria and its impact on religious freedom conditions in the country;
- Develop localized strategies and engage diplomatically with key local government authorities in regions where state-sanctioned or tolerated violations are frequent to bring state practices in line with the constitution and international obligations; and
- Strengthen the public affairs capacity at the U.S. Embassy in Abuja to respond publicly to developments in religious freedom conditions in Nigeria, including commenting on court cases against religious prisoners of conscience, as well as to amplify domestic voices advocating for stronger religious freedom norms.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Violent Islamist Groups in Northern Nigeria](#)
- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Nigeria in 2020](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Religious Tensions and Fulani Communities in West and Central Africa](#)

Background

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with an estimated [219 million people](#). Among these, an estimated 53.5 percent identify as Muslim; 45.9 percent identify as Christian; and 0.6 percent identify with other religious beliefs, including atheism, the Baha'i faith, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and African traditional religions.

The [1999 Constitution](#) protects freedom of religion or belief and prohibits the state from establishing a state religion and from discriminating on the basis of religion. The [Nigerian Criminal Code](#) includes a penalty of up to two years imprisonment for insulting a person's religion. Additionally, 12 Muslim-majority northern states use Islamic Shari'a criminal and family codes alongside civil and customary laws; these Shari'a codes prohibit blasphemy.

Religion in Nigeria plays a [strong role](#) in social and political life. There are also [deeply entrenched religious divisions](#) and mistrust. Often, religious tensions overlap with ethnic identity, exacerbating [ethnoreligious conflicts](#) driven by both the religious and ethnic aspects of victims' and perpetrators' identities.

The Nigerian government is currently conducting [military operations](#) against Boko Haram and ISWAP in the northeast of the country. Despite federal government [claims](#) that it has defeated Boko Haram, these groups remain significant threats to civilians and religious freedom in the Lake Chad Basin region. [Human rights abuses](#) by Nigerian counterterrorism actors have reportedly exacerbated insecurity and put civilian lives at risk.

Attacks on Houses of Worship and Religious Ceremonies

In February, Boko Haram militants attacked Garkida, a town known as the foundation of the Church of the Brethren in the country, [burning at least five churches](#). In a series of attacks in Kaduna State in March, suspected Fulani militants [burned four churches](#). In April, armed assailants believed to be affiliated with Fulani militias attacked a [Christian wedding ceremony](#) in Niger State, killing 12 people and abducting the bride and groom. In July, unidentified gunmen [killed 18 people](#) at a Christian wedding party in Kaduna State and injured 30 others.

In May, reported Islamist extremists attacked a community as people were preparing to break their Ramadan fast, killing [at least 20 people](#). That same month, reported jihadist elements [attacked](#) the city of Maiduguri as locals were preparing celebrations of the Islamic festival Eid al-Adha, killing four people and wounding three others. In October, unidentified criminals [burned down two mosques](#) in Enugu in the south of the country.

Militant Islamist Extremism

Militant Islamist groups in northern Nigeria continue to hold territory and commit severe attacks and human rights abuses in northeast Nigeria and the broader Lake Chad Basin region. Moreover, these groups have [expanded their territory west](#), with ISWAP now conducting activities in Sokoto State and Boko Haram operating in Kaduna State.

ISWAP fighters abducted and [executed Ropvil Daciya Dalep](#), a Christian university student, in January; abducted a [Christian pastor](#) and two women in Borno State in October; and [executed five aid workers](#) as a warning to "all those being used by infidels to convert Muslims to Christianity." Boko Haram fighters abducted

Reverend Lawan Andimi, local CAN chairman in Adamawa State, and later beheaded him, reportedly because [he would not renounce his faith](#). In December, after threatening attacks against Christians during the Christmas season, Boko Haram fighters conducted three attacks against Christian communities in northern Nigeria, [killing at least 12 people](#) and abducting an Evangelical pastor. Additionally, in January, jihadist group Ansaru [reemerged](#) in Niger State for the first time since 2013, claiming responsibility for an [attack on "apostates"](#) in August.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

In 2020, state authorities violated several Nigerian individuals' rights to freedom of religion or belief, including by escalating enforcement of blasphemy laws in comparison to previous years. In August, a Shari'a court in Kano State convicted [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#) of blasphemy for insulting the Prophet Muhammad in a private WhatsApp message and sentenced him to death—a higher court later [invalidated the conviction](#) and demanded a retrial. Kano authorities also found 16-year-old [Omar Farouk](#) guilty of blasphemy and detained him throughout the year, although his conviction was overturned in early 2021 and he was released.

Police also [arrested](#) prominent atheist activist [Mubarak Bala](#) in April 2020 after a coalition of lawyers in Kano State filed a petition accusing him of insulting the Prophet Muhammad in Facebook posts. For more than eight months, Kano State police detained Bala without charges, limiting his access to his legal team and refusing to provide proof of his whereabouts and wellbeing to his family. In December, after many months of delay, a federal court ruled Bala's detention unconstitutional and ordered his release—however, as of the end of 2020, Bala remained in Kano State police custody despite this order.

Key U.S. Policy

In December 2019, the U.S. Department of State included Nigeria for the first time on its Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to IRFA. A year later, on December 2, 2020, the U.S. Department of State [designated](#) Nigeria as a CPC for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe violations under IRFA, an action USCIRF had recommended every year since 2009. However, at the same time it made the CPC designation, the State Department issued a waiver on any related sanctions as required in the "important national interest of the United States," pursuant to Section 407 of IRFA.

U.S. funding to Nigeria continued to prioritize humanitarian assistance and economic development. In November, the United States and Nigeria [cohosted](#) a meeting of the coalition against the Islamic State and affirmed their commitment to defeating Boko Haram and ISWAP. U.S. diplomatic efforts in Nigeria included peaceful conflict resolution programming in regions experiencing high levels of violence as well as monitoring cases of religious prisoners of conscience.

In November, following Nigerian authorities' violent crackdown on peaceful demonstrators protesting police abuse, the Congressional Black Caucus sent a [letter](#) to President Muhammadu Buhari condemning state-sanctioned violence against peaceful nonviolent protesters in Nigeria and calling for dialogue. Texas Representatives Al Green and Joaquin Castro introduced a [resolution](#) supporting the protesters to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Individual Views of Commissioner Gary L. Bauer

Nigeria is quickly becoming a “killing field” for that nation’s Christians. The hour is late. Nigeria’s government seems unable or unwilling to stop the growing carnage. In large swaths of the country, Christian parents fear for their children every day when they go to school. Those children are targeted by savage Islamists who kidnap and force them to renounce Christ or face death. Every time a Nigerian Christian family worships at a church, they are painfully aware it may be the last thing they do on this earth. The churches are ripe targets for Boko Haram and other jihadists. Christians have been blown up or “mowed” down in their places of worship.

All too often this violence is attributed to mere “bandits” or explained away as hostility between farmers and herdsmen. While there is some truth in these assertions, they ignore the main truth: radical Islamists are committing violence inspired by what they believe is a religious imperative to “cleanse” Nigeria of its Christians. They must be stopped.

The failure of many in the international human rights community and the Western media to accurately describe what is really happening in Nigeria is inexcusable. More Christians have been killed for their faith in Nigeria in the last year than in the entire Middle East. Unless we find our voice, what is happening in Nigeria will move relentlessly toward a Christian genocide.

We are pleased that in December of 2020, the U.S. Department of State finally included Nigeria as a country engaged in egregious violations of religious freedom. Much more must be done.

Individual Views of Commissioner James W. Carr

Nigeria was considered by many to have a strong commitment to religious freedom. In the past decade or so, however, religious freedom conditions in Nigeria have significantly worsened. While all religious communities and people of no belief face dangerous conditions, the situation for Christians is extremely perilous. We now regularly read of kidnappings, rapes, and murders that are being committed against the Christian community. Sadly, as we look around the world, many now believe that religious freedom violations in Nigeria may be among the worst in the world, if not the worst. As a Commission member, I am concerned about the country’s inability, or reluctance, to protect the Christian community. I for one believe that Nigeria is better than this and that the Nigerian people and their leaders must step up and recommit themselves to the protection of ALL Nigerians to believe and worship freely as they choose. These atrocities being committed against Christian families must stop.

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

The persistent facts-be-damned approach to the conflict(s) in Africa’s most populated country has resulted in more loss of life, year in and year out. It is simply incomprehensible to me that proud and beautiful Nigeria remains in its present condition. How long will this continue? The world must do more. The United States must recognize and correct its policy failures. Unfortunately, the perilous situation is now spreading more and more to other countries. Will it take a caliphate in West Africa to awaken the international community? The status quo is unsustainable. This is a tinderbox.