



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

June 2025

GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: FOUNDATION FOR SECURING FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

Vicky Hartzler
Chair

Asif Mahmood
Vice Chair

Commissioners

Ariela Dubler
Mohamed Elsanousi
Maureen Ferguson
Stephen Schneck
Meir Soloveichik

Erin D. Singshinsuk
Executive Director

USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international
freedom of religion or
belief, by independently
assessing and unflinchingly
confronting threats to this
fundamental right.*

On May 5, 2025, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a hearing, *Governance in Nigeria: Foundation for Securing Freedom of Religion or Belief*. Led by USCIRF Chair Stephen Schneck and Commissioners Maureen Ferguson and Vicky Hartzler, the hearing assembled representatives from the U.S. government, academia, and Nigerian civil society. Witnesses discussed religious freedom conditions in Nigeria and potential policy options for the U.S. government.

[Chair Schneck](#) opened the hearing by calling attention to the ongoing use of blasphemy laws to target religious minorities. He also explained how nonstate actors and a general sense of insecurity threaten all religious communities in Nigeria. The government's historical lack of accountability has made the situation worse, especially in more isolated areas. He noted that reliance on vigilante groups is not an acceptable solution to Nigeria's security challenges; rather, the government should ultimately take accountability for security. He discussed the persecution of indigenous religious practitioners and highlighted the recent release of humanist Mubarak Bala. Chair Schneck further lauded civil society efforts, especially from faith-based groups, as crucial to advancing religious freedom in Nigeria. He closed by reiterating USCIRF's policy recommendation that the U.S. administration redirect assistance to protect vulnerable religious communities.

[Commissioner Vicky Hartzler](#) offered remarks about the ongoing persecution of Nigerian Christians, including the deadly impact of the Fulani herder-farmer conflict on that community. She pointed out that Christian farmers are losing their livelihoods as Fulani attacks bring significant harm to the country's vital food security. She also emphasized that nonstate actors, including Islamist extremist groups, have reportedly killed 62,000 Christians since 2000 and also stand accused of kidnapping and sexually assaulting Christian women amid the ongoing violence.

[Commissioner Maureen Ferguson](#) focused on the plights of several other religious freedom victims, such as Leah Sharibu, who remains a prisoner of the Islamic State – West Africa Province (ISWAP) since her 2018 abduction. Ferguson reported that in 2022, a mob stoned college student Deborah Yakubu to death on her campus in Sokoto State and then burned her body after accusing her of blasphemy against Islam. Commissioner Ferguson also emphasized that internally displaced persons (IDP) camps remain full of residents trapped without hope, and many Chibok schoolgirls still suffer abuse by their radical Islamist captors after their 2014 abductions. She raised concern about the Nigerian government's slow response in responding to violence against Christians, and she mentioned Bishop Wilfred Chikpa Anagbe's testimony before the Africa Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee in March about the government's forced closure of Christian schools during this past Ramadan.

[Frank R. Wolf](#), former USCIRF Commissioner and U.S. Congressman, explained how tens of thousands of Christians and Muslims have died from violence in a country that has received millions of dollars in U.S. foreign aid. He noted that USCIRF has reported and recommended Country of Particular Concern (CPC) designation for Nigeria for years. He strongly urged the State Department to immediately enable humanitarian expert Bob Gersony to go to Nigeria to investigate religious freedom conditions and produce a “fair, independent, field-based appraisal” to inform policy makers. The U.S. should “do everything” to leverage the Nigerian government to act.

[Samah Norquist](#), former Chief Advisor for International Religious Freedom to the Administrator of USAID, presented some background on religious freedom legislation relevant to Nigeria and noted that bipartisan support for religious freedom promotion remains strong. She testified that as the chief coordinator for international religious freedom, she “witnessed how USAID’s independence in delivering foreign assistance was critical to advancing religious freedom,” particularly “with the Africa Bureau and USAID’s mission in Nigeria.” She noted that “America’s leadership on advancing religious freedom ... is instrumental.” Ms. Norquist also spoke favorably of the decision of the first administration of President Donald J. Trump to recognize Nigeria as a CPC.

[Jumo Ayandele](#), Visiting Assistant Professor of Practice at New York University, explained how nonstate armed groups, such as ISWAP, remain a significant threat in northeastern Nigeria, further describing how disputes over land, identity, and political representation create conflict in north central states. She assessed that while criminal gangs target all religious communities in the country’s northwest, “the Nigerian government’s broader security response has been mixed.” Military operations have helped reduce these attacks, and community-based initiatives such as media campaigns and interfaith mediation provide some hope for the future. Ms. Ayandele concluded by recommending that the relevant parties, including the U.S. government, work to strengthen identity-based conflict monitoring and early warning systems, help expand and professionalize interfaith mediation and community resilience programs, and support efforts to combine Nigerian military and security operations with robust human rights safeguards.

[Zakaria Bulus](#), Fellow at the Gerald Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan, explained that Christians in Nigeria particularly face severe

challenges that are rooted in a combination of religious, ethnic, and political tensions. He indicated that state-imposed Shari’a marginalizes and discriminates against Christians, while radical ideologies promote hatred between groups and deepen divisions, leading to terror activities that are often justified on religious grounds. He argued, however, that poverty and unemployment are also significant economic drivers of extremism in northern Nigeria. He recommended that the United States “promote humanitarian reform” in Nigeria by “leveraging its diplomatic and multilateral power to hold authorities accountable for systemic discrimination, religiously motivated violence, and unequal access to development and security resources.” Dr. Bulus also noted that, “peace, security and religious freedom for all Nigerians is very, very important,” and affirmed that U.S. foreign assistance should be run by private organizations on the ground with additional funds being allocated based on substantive progress and proof of integration into society.

[Shamsuddeen Magaji Bello](#), a Muslim scholar at Ohio University and founder of Kebbi Community Action, argued that the Nigerian government’s use of blasphemy laws and imposition of Shari’a harms religious freedom. He noted that social media influencers often face arrest for vaguely defined “immoral actions”: “No convictions. No due process. Just arbitrary detention, public shaming, and reputational damage.” Mr. Bello noted that the government persecutes Shi’a Muslims as well as Sunni clerics, such as Sheikh Abduljabbar Nasiru Kabara, for expressing dissenting religious views. He emphasized that the government has also failed to respond with urgency to these challenges. Mr. Bello testified that initiatives to enhance transparency and work toward a peaceful intrafaith dialogue can allow the emergence of national unity. He concluded by noting that “development and humanitarian assistance can help address the needs of all communities affected by insurgent violence.”

Following witness testimonies, Chair Schneck led a question-and-answer session to discuss potential policy options for the U.S. government. During this session, witnesses agreed that the role of civil society is critical in reducing violence in Nigeria, especially using local initiatives and grassroots efforts. The witnesses concurred that the government should work with citizens and community organizations and that any assistance money should be spent with accountability in mind. They added that IDP camp residents should not be forgotten but rather treated as Nigerians who deserve proper care and education. Additionally, interfaith mediation and dialogue



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are critical in fomenting peace, but more needs to be done. Finally, the government needs to better address the recent herder-farmer violence because history suggests this type of conflict has not always been the norm. Bello affirmed that independent faith communities and expert local voices should be included in decision making on

foreign aid, but also stressed the importance of checks and balances to prevent and deal with corruption that would undermine funding effectiveness.

Chair Schneck concluded the hearing by thanking the witnesses for their testimony.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan legislative branch agency established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.