

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in [Nigeria](#) remained abysmal. Federal and state governments continued to tolerate, inadequately respond to or investigate, or otherwise fail to pursue justice for religious violence by [nonstate actors](#). These nonstate actors routinely seek to impose a singular interpretation of Islam on individuals and communities in their areas of operation, regardless of these individuals' or communities' own religion or belief. These actors include Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS, also known as Boko Haram), Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), and Islamic State-Sahel Province (ISSP). In January, JAS assailants burned down a church auditorium, killing several people. Mahmuda, a new faction of JAS, killed four Fulanis in April in Kwara. In July, Lakurawa insurgents affiliated with ISSP killed 15 Muslims in Sokoto. In September, JAS/Boko Haram killed more than 60 Muslims in Borno, and the group's capture of Kirawa in Borno in October sent 5,000 people fleeing to Cameroon.

Assailants, including Fulani militants who manipulated Islam to justify their use of violence, frequently attacked religious communities throughout the year. Increasing violence in the Middle Belt region especially impacted Christians: Fulani gunmen killed [around 200 displaced persons](#) at a Catholic mission in Yelwata in June, after which some protesters accused the government of failing to protect the victims. Militants also killed Reverend Yahaya Kambasaya and abducted 20 other Christians in Kaduna in October, and attackers abducted 38 worshippers from a church service the following month, killing two and kidnapping the pastor. Assailants also abducted over 300 people, primarily schoolchildren, from a Catholic boarding school in Niger, to which parents of some of

those children responded by criticizing the government for shutting down schools rather than securing them. These abductions are just the latest in a series of such incidents that have traumatized religious communities in Nigeria since 2009, as kidnappers have seized thousands of children for ransom or sexual slavery—like Christian [Leah Sharibu](#), who has been in captivity since 2018. In August, attackers also abducted over 100 individuals, mostly women and children, from a mosque in Zamfara, and killed 13 worshippers at a mosque in Katsina. In September, assailants kidnapped 18 Muslim women and children in Zamfara as they were preparing for morning prayers and abducted three Muslims from a mosque in Zamfara.

The Nigerian federal government continued to enforce blasphemy laws that include a penalty of up to two years' imprisonment for acts "persons consider as a public insult on their religion." Several state governments also enforced more stringent blasphemy laws to prosecute and imprison individuals perceived to have insulted religion, including Christians, Muslims, and humanists. At least four prisoners remained in state custody on blasphemy charges at the end of the year, including [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#), [Isma'ila Sani Isah](#), [Sheikh Abduljabar Nasiru Kabara](#), and [Abdulazeez Inyass](#). In September, the Supreme Court of Nigeria held an initial hearing to review Sharif-Aminu's case challenging Kano State's blasphemy law.

In March, the states of Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, and Bauchi [closed](#) all schools during Ramadan, including Christian institutions. Roman Catholic Bishop Wilfred Anagbe [received](#) anonymous threats after [testifying](#) before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs Africa Subcommittee in March on the violence against Christians in Benue.

### 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);
- Redesignate JAS/Boko Haram, ISWAP, and ISSP as "entities of particular concern," or EPCs, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
- Enact targeted sanctions, visa denials pursuant to 212(a)(2)(G) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, and other [penalties](#) against Nigerian government and military

officials who tolerate religiously motivated violence and/or violence against religious communities, or those who are complicit in attacks on these communities; and

- Enter into a binding agreement with the Nigerian government, under Section 405(c) of IRFA, to encourage substantial steps to address violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), including reporting on religious violence, returning displaced persons to their homes, and improving security and military training; and tie foreign assistance as well as bilateral policies on trade, arms purchases, and visa reciprocity to benchmarks on religious freedom improvement.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Request that the General Accountability Office (GAO) monitor the efficiency of foreign assistance funds disbursed to protect FoRB in Nigeria; and
- Support efforts through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission and other bodies working on human rights in Africa to highlight religious freedom challenges in Nigeria, including insecurity and atrocity risks, and pass bipartisan legislation holding accountable individuals and entities in Nigeria complicit in FoRB violations.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Governance in Nigeria: Foundation for Securing Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)
- **Spotlight Podcast:** [Blasphemy and FoRB in Nigeria: A Conversation with Mubarak Bala](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [Nigerian Girls Are Being Kidnapped](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

## Background

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with a population of about 237 million. Around 53 percent of the population is Muslim, 46 percent is Christian, and other beliefs make up the remaining one percent.

Nigeria's 1999 constitution protects FoRB and prohibits the establishment of an official religion. It also recognizes common civil law courts, traditional law, and Shari'a courts for criminal and non-criminal proceedings, although common law theoretically takes precedence.

Twelve of 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) utilize Shari'a-based criminal and personal status laws alongside civil and customary statutes, prohibiting blasphemy and other perceived religious offenses. As such, state courts often enforce penal codes according to their particular and rigid interpretations of Shari'a that assign corporal punishment for serious criminal offenses, including caning, amputation, and execution by stoning. State officials erroneously claim that blasphemy laws deter FoRB violence, and federal officials generally defer to their discretion. In November, some Nigerian Muslim leaders called the U.S. designation of Nigeria as a CPC "a direct assault on Islam" and dismissed calls to drop blasphemy and other religious laws.

## Religious Violence by Fulani Militants

Ethnic Fulani militants continued to escalate violence in 2025, often against Christians in the Middle Belt, by attacking their villages and churches. In March, such militants killed at least 52 in Plateau, forcing many Christians to flee. In May, in Kogi, militants abducted pastors Adura Kayode and Kingsley Ebing of the City of Grace Prophetic Liberation Church, although they later escaped. That same month, a Catholic priest in Benue survived a murder attempt by a Fulani assailant, and in September, militants kidnapped and killed Pastor James Issa of the Evangelical Winning All Church in Kwara, despite receiving ransom money. Fulani militants also reportedly killed seven Fulani Muslim herders in Kano in October.

Criminal bandits also continued to target religious institutions, including a series of attacks on the Catholic Church. Unidentified assailants kidnapped and killed Father Sylvester Okechukwu in Kaduna in March. Armed attackers also kidnapped Father Philip Ekweli and seminarian Peter Andrew in Edo, subsequently freeing Ekweli but killing Andrew. In April, assailants kidnapped Catholic priest Ibrahim Amos in Kaduna but later released him unharmed.

## Nigerian Government Actions

The Nigerian government largely continued to fail to decisively act to address or respond to the ongoing epidemic of religious violence throughout the country, as corruption, inadequate allotment of resources like funding or personnel, and other limitations persisted in 2025. However, the country's military carried out a series of counterinsurgency operations throughout the year, killing 100 militants in Zamfara in August and 17 in Borno in September, while arresting 55

and rescuing 10 abductees in the process. However, the military also faced a significant shakeup in October when President Bola Ahmed Tinubu replaced its leadership to "strengthen the national security architecture" after a reported coup d'etat plot. In November, in response to U.S. President Donald J. Trump's designation of Nigeria as a CPC and criticism of anti-Christian violence, the Nigerian government denied the existence of religious persecution and asserted the country's constitutional commitment to religious freedom and rule of law. Shortly afterward, President Tinubu "reaffirmed his commitment to defeating terrorism" as he redeployed 100,000 police officers from bodyguard duty to operations countering violent threats while ordering more forest guards to address the kidnapping epidemic. There were approximately 3.5 million internally displaced persons in Nigeria by the end of 2025, many of whom were victims of religious violence. The government has been slow and ineffective in rebuilding security and infrastructure necessary for them to return to their homes in a safe and dignified manner.

In August, police in Niger opened an investigation into the mob killing of a food vendor after rumors circulated that she made blasphemous remarks to a customer. In February, police in Numan captured one kidnapper and freed unharmed two priests, Father Mathew David Dusami of Yola Diocese and Father Abraham Samman of Jalingo Diocese. In April, police in Anambra rescued Catholic priest Father Stephen Echezona, whom bandits had abducted earlier. In December, troops rescued several hostages in Kaduna.

## Key U.S. Policy

While the U.S. Department of State [suspended](#) most aid to Nigeria in January, military aid continued without conditions based on advances to FoRB. In August, the State Department [approved](#) Nigeria's purchase of \$346 million worth of weapons, and it sent \$32.5 million in humanitarian aid in September. Members of the [House of Representatives](#) and the [Senate](#) introduced resolutions in March and September, respectively, that called on the Trump administration to designate Nigeria as a CPC, while five senators sent a [letter](#) to the secretary of state in September to request the same. In October, President Trump designated Nigeria as a [CPC](#), threatened to send U.S. troops to stop violence against Christians, and promised to halt all aid. In late December, the U.S. administration coordinated with the Nigerian government to conduct airstrikes on ISSP sites in Sokoto. The House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa held two hearings in 2025: one in [March](#) to call for Nigeria's CPC designation, and another in [November](#) to consider President Trump's designation as such. In December, the State Department [announced](#) visa restrictions on Nigerians engaged in religious freedom violations, including government officials, and extending those restrictions to other countries.

The U.S. Department State last designated JAS/Boko Haram, ISSP, and ISWAP as EPCs on December 29, 2023.