

Testimony of Dr. Olajumoke (Jumo) Ayandele

Chair Schneck, Commissioners, and esteemed colleagues,

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Dr. Olajumoke (Jumo) Ayandele, and I serve as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Transnational Security at New York University's Center for Global Affairs.

Today, I would like to focus my remarks on two urgent and interconnected challenges: first, the ways in which violence perpetrated by non-state actors in Northern Nigeria continues to erode religious freedom; and second, how the Nigerian government's response has shaped the protection—or, at times, the vulnerability—of religious communities across the country.

Violence by non-state armed groups remains one of the most serious threats to religious freedom in Nigeria today. In 2024 alone, Nigeria recorded over 4,300 incidents of political violence—a 22 percent increase compared to the previous year—with civilians accounting for nearly half of all casualties. Armed groups such as the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP), Boko Haram, communal militias, and Fulani pastoralists have systematically targeted communities along perceived religious and ethnic lines, severely constraining the exercise of religious freedoms.

In Northeast Nigeria, ISWAP and Boko Haram continue to exploit religious and political divisions to justify violence, disproportionately targeting Christian farming communities and Muslims perceived as either rejecting extremist ideology or cooperating with the state. Tactics such as abductions, killings, and the imposition of informal taxation on communities are used not only to finance operations but also to intimidate and restrict free religious expression.

In the North Central region, religious affiliation increasingly intersects with disputes over land, identity, and political representation. Christian-majority communities in Plateau State, in particular, have raised credible concerns about targeted religious persecution, fears of gradual Islamization, and land encroachments perceived as efforts to erode their identity and communal cohesion.

In the Northwest, while violence is often described as criminal rather than religious, the impact on Muslim communities is no less significant. Armed bandit groups, operating largely in Muslim-majority areas across Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna States, have carried out mass abductions, killings, and extortion. These attacks have profoundly disrupted religious gatherings and communal worship.

This complex security landscape reminds us that both Christian and Muslim communities remain vulnerable when insecurity becomes entrenched.

Against this troubling backdrop, the Nigerian government's broader security response has been mixed.

Military operations in the Northeast and Northwest have made some progress in dismantling insurgent networks. Deradicalization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (DRR) programs—though unevenly implemented—have provided pathways for some former insurgents to reenter civilian life. States such as Gombe offer encouraging examples, where stronger governance, community dialogue, and early warning systems have helped maintain relative stability.

Community-based initiatives have also offered hope.

Religious media campaigns have played a quiet but powerful role in promoting interfaith dialogue and fostering a culture of peace. The recent interfaith dialogue in Yobe State, for example, represents an important step toward rebuilding trust between Christian and Muslim communities, even amid persistent insecurity.

Still, these successes remain fragile.

Military operations, while necessary, have at times resulted in unintended civilian casualties, further straining trust between religious communities and the state. The continued failure to distinguish clearly between criminal, ethnic, and religiously motivated violence have also undermined efforts to provide targeted protection for vulnerable groups. In many areas, both Christian and Muslim communities feel abandoned, unprotected, and unheard.

Moreover, many interfaith mediation organizations operate under severe constraints. These include inadequate training for mediators, the disruptive influence of extremist actors and conflict entrepreneurs, and chronic underfunding for peacebuilding initiatives. Low literacy rates and widespread poverty have also left many communities particularly susceptible to manipulation and radicalization, further complicating efforts to foster sustainable peace.

Nonetheless, the experiences of states like Gombe and Yobe demonstrate that, when properly supported, localized initiatives can meaningfully contribute to protecting religious freedom and reducing intercommunal tensions.

In closing, I respectfully offer the following recommendations:

First, it is critical to strengthen identity-based conflict monitoring and early warning systems. Doing so would improve the ability to distinguish between criminal, ethnic, and religiously motivated violence—allowing for more precise, timely, and effective interventions. Supporting community-based early warning mechanisms can also empower local actors to detect and address tensions before they escalate.

Second, a concerted effort is needed to professionalize and scale interfaith mediation and community resilience programs. This includes providing mediators with appropriate training and oversight, and expanding grassroots initiatives—such as religious media campaigns—that promote tolerance, encourage interfaith dialogue, and foster peaceful coexistence.

Third, military and security operations must be consistently paired with robust human rights safeguards. Protecting civilians must remain central to any security strategy. These operations

should be integrated with both pre-conflict peacebuilding efforts and post-conflict reconciliation processes to ensure immediate threats are addressed without deepening existing grievances or alienating the very communities they aim to protect.

Nigeria stands at a pivotal moment.

Religious freedom is under sustained assault from violent non-state actors and is further weakened by inconsistent government responses.

A more deliberate, community-centered, and human rights–focused strategy is urgently needed if Nigeria is to move toward a future of inclusive stability and sustainable peace.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to your questions.