

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Governance in Nigeria: Foundation for Securing Freedom of Religion or Belief May 5, 2025

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Panel II

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Introduction

Honorable Chair and Members of the Committee.

I appreciate the chance to address you today. I stand before you today both as a development and humanitarian professional and a Nigerian from the Northeastern region who has lived through the genuine experiences of ongoing attacks by non-state actors on innocent Nigerians. My direct observations confirm the severe consequences of violence throughout the Middle Belt, Northeast and Northern regions of Nigeria. This paper will seek to present and discuss threats to religious freedom in Nigeria, including violence targeting religious communities perpetrated by non-state actors. I will also discuss current U.S. policy as it relates to foreign assistance programming that advances religious freedom by addressing conflict and security in Nigeria.

Complex Challenges Facing Christians in Northern Nigeria: Root Causes and Urgent Needs.

The severe challenges faced by many Christians in Nigeria today, especially in the northern region, are multifaceted and deeply rooted in a combination of religious, political, ethnic, ethno-religious, and ethno-Political tensions. Christians in Borno State and across Nigeria continue to face extreme risk, which is particularly exacerbated by the implementation of Islamic Sharia law in several

northern states (Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe, Zamfara.), persistent violence from insurgent groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and violent conflicts involving Fulani militants/herders. The challenges are particularly dire for Christians living in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, many of whom have fled [years ago] their homes due to targeted violence against them and their communities.

There is an urgent need for more comprehensive dedication to developing sustainable solutions to violence against Christians in Nigeria, and this demands a comprehensive understanding of all the elements that cause this violence. These elements include:

Religious Discrimination and Marginalization Under Sharia Law

The main challenge is the insensitivity of the government to other faiths in states where Sharia is being practiced. Freedom of religion is intentionally ignored at the expense of the Christian minority. A typical example is in Borno, Yobe States and many northern states where Muslims are of the majority, teaching of Christian religious studies in primary and post primary schools are prohibited as Sharia is strongly against such teaching.

This makes Christian feel marginalized and seen as second-class citizens. Even though the Sharia law is not enforced on Christians openly (most of the time) they are denied certain nearly all public appointments and positions way because of their faith. Another example is denial of lands to build churches to practice their faith, while the government uses state funds to finance mosque building projects. More affluent Christians in the north have to buy lands in their own names and donate the property to their churches for the building of worship centers. Regularly these churches may be demolished under the pretense of no certificate of occupancy.

Radical and Extremist Religious Ideologies.

Radical ideologies promote hatred between groups, deepen divisions which lead to terror activities justified through Islamic religious beliefs. Insurgency primarily targets Christians. Christians are losing their ancestral homes, lands, properties and even their lives due to violent extremism by the jihadists. Since churches have been burnt and destroyed (with some members killed and burnt) it's a direct message to Christians that their faith has been attacked and not protected in practice. Thousands of Christians have been compelled by these assaults to evacuate their homes, resulting in internal displacement and loss of livelihood, community, and religious life among their people and place of origin. This violence instills fear in Christians and makes practicing their religion difficult and in some places, Christians are not performing worship services.

Political Marginalization, Bias, and the Exploitation of Identity in Governance

The Political landscape reflects widespread governance failures, systemic corruption and the deliberate exploitation of religious and ethnic identities to secure power while inciting discord. Another challenge is the discrimination by the government to the plights of displaced Christians by the extremist. Palliatives are mostly distributed to displaced Muslims - Christian IDP camps often receive no relief aid. The government is biased when it comes to reconstruction and resettlement of the displaced victims of insurgency. More Muslims receive priority treatment compared to Christians in that context.

Poverty, Unemployment, and Economic Drivers of Extremism in Northern Nigeria

Most of the people in Northern Nigeria live in chronic abject poverty. Due to chronic unemployment and fierce competition for limited resources creates conditions that extremist groups exploit to fuel conflict and recruit members.

Impact of Religious Extremism on Christian Practice and Community Life

The most impacted areas have seen extreme persecution on Christians who are intimidated from freely practicing their religion due to violence and terror. In places judged dangerous, churches have closed. Sometimes Christian celebrations and events take place under great security or in secret. Intercommunal trust has faded, and in certain areas Christian identification may cause targeting or open persecution. Many displaced Christians now reside in IDP camps in which many IDPs lack access to adequate housing, healthcare, good drinking water, and education. Their displacement is often prolonged due to the continued instability in their home communities. The imposition of Sharia law in Nigeria, which began 25 years ago with a single northern state (Zamfara), has since proliferated to dominate the region. The recently concluded Ramadan fasting, in March 2025, was the first time that six northern states (Bauchi, Borno, Jigawa, Kano, and Yobe) unconstitutionally imposed Sharia-based legal restrictions, including school-and-office closures, to promote Islamic religious observance. Within a space of one week, from April 20th to April 28th, more than 100 Christians were killed in Borno state alone.

Comprehensive Strategies to Address Religious Extremism and Promote Inclusive Governance in Nigeria

In order to ensure inclusion and religious freedom, Nigeria's government - at the state, local and national levels - must stop supporting a one-sided religious reality. It must prevent the imposition of Sharia law and its practices, given the nation's religious diversity and pluralism. It is important that the government at all levels must uphold fairness and support victims of violent extremism/displaced people irrespective of their religious beliefs. The Nigerian constitution prohibits closure of schools and offices during fasting, so the governors that imposed such closures should be held accountable for this violation. If they face no consequences, it stands to reason that the practice

will only continue to spread to additional states. Closure of roads during Friday Muslim prayers in the northern Nigeria should also be discouraged.

To uphold the law of the land in Nigeria and guarantee inclusive governance, freedom of religion must be protected at all levels. The government should provide support to community-based interfaith projects to foster mutual dialogue and trust among religious communities. It should give local leaders tools to identify and defuse conflicts before they become violent. State governments should be held accountable to ensure respect for non-Muslims' constitutional rights, upholding equal access to public services, education, and employment to reduce marginalization. In sensitive regions, security and intelligence presence should be strengthened to safeguard all people regardless of religion. Law-enforcement and the courts should punish those who engage in religious violence thus eradicating the impunity culture.

Nigeria's central government has not paid enough attention to the plight of religious minorities in the Northern states. If it does not do more to enforce the rule of law there, the violence and repression of extremist groups will inevitably spread and affect more and more of the nation's people. It should therefore recognize the urgency to implement national measures against ethno-religious exclusion, safeguarding the rights of all Nigerians. We can protect Nigerians' fundamental rights to freedom of religion or beliefs and ensure a stable and just future only by addressing all these interconnected drivers.

Strategic U.S. Engagement to Advance Religious Freedom and Equitable Recovery in Nigeria.

I believe that the United States can play a critical role in promoting humanitarian reform in Nigeria by leveraging more of its diplomatic and multilateral power to hold Nigerian authorities accountable for systemic discrimination, religiously motivated violence, and unequal access to development and security resources under the Nigerian leadership's watch. To this end, the U.S.

could review and reform its conditions for foreign aid to Nigeria in ways that more rigorously uphold the humanitarian principles of impartiality, humanity, neutrality, and independence. Currently, U.S. humanitarian-services funding provided to the government in Northern Nigeria is distributed in discriminatory ways that often exclude Christians, many of whom have been displaced and live under constant threat of violence. U.S. aid conditions can help promote more inclusive government and religious freedom to protect the Christian minority in the North, especially in areas impacted by Sharia law and religious extremism. Aid should be tied to clear advancement in maintaining religious neutrality and fair treatment of all people, prioritizing funding for grassroots faith-based and civil society projects that promote tolerance, restore intercommunal trust, and empower all without partiality. Primary responsibility to uphold the rule of law in Nigeria rests with Nigeria's federal government, but the American government should recognize how important its voice and actions are to the global peace and heed the heart cry of Christian leaders in Northern Nigeria who have repeatedly called for recognition of their community's plight.

Conclusion.

While many Nigerian Christians continue to practice their faith courageously, insecurity and systemic discrimination are still major obstacles. Only a multi-layered approach—local peacebuilding, state neutrality, and national commitment to religious freedom can create an environment where all Nigerians, regardless of faith, can worship without fear. Christian leaders and civil society groups have called for greater recognition of religiously motivated violence, urging national and international actors to act. Christians in Nigeria, especially in Borno State but also across the country, remain under significant threat from violent extremism and religiously motivated attacks. Their suffering highlights the urgent need for coordinated action across all

levels of government, civil society, and international partners to uphold religious freedom, protect vulnerable populations, and restore dignity and security to displaced communities. By imposing thoughtfully designed aid conditions, the U.S. can play a critical role in ensuring equitable aid distribution by the Nigerian government, and including relief distributions by faith-based organizations, to counter religious bias and promote reconstruction of Christian communities, churches, and livelihoods through targeted support and protection.