



**Governance in Nigeria: The Foundation for Securing Freedom of
Religion or Belief**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Stephen Schneck, USCIRF Chair

Good afternoon and welcome to today's hearing hosted by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. I'm Chair Stephen Schneck and it's my pleasure to welcome you to this important event. I would also like to thank Senator Lankford for reserving the room for today's hearing. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan legislative branch agency created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. President, Secretary of State, and Congress. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this hearing.

Nigeria is a country with a multitude of ethnic groups, a decades-old democracy, and one of the most religious populations in the continent of Africa. In this hearing, we'd like to contextualize religious freedom issues in Nigeria within a governance framework. USCIRF first recommended the U.S. Department of State designate Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern—or CPC—in 2001. USCIRF has continued to do so consistently since 2009. In its 2025 Annual Report, USCIRF concludes that religious freedom conditions remain poor. Nigeria's constitution declares respect for religious freedom. However, governance at the state level reflects a wholly different practice. In twelve northern states, local governments enforce criminal and family laws based on Islamic Shari'a. As a result, every person in those states is subject to laws that prohibit blasphemy and other offenses based on Islamic law as interpreted by each state's high court. This enforcement occurs regardless of their personal religious beliefs. Currently, four Nigerian Muslims remain imprisoned for blasphemy. Nigeria's Muslim-majority state governments and Shari'a courts have also prosecuted non-Muslims, even though their jurisdiction is supposed to be limited solely to Muslims.

Religious freedom restrictions in Nigeria are occurring in a broader context of security threats, especially outside of major cities. Nigeria's remote areas are often difficult to secure. Even when present, security forces are often outnumbered by

non-state entities that possess superior firepower. These entities routinely target religious communities

At the same time, non-state entities including J-A-S (also known as Boko Haram), the Islamic State - West Africa Province (ISWAP), and the Lakurawa seek to impose a singular interpretation of Islam upon Muslims and non-Muslims alike. While Nigeria's military has made some recent inroads in combatting these groups, Nigerians living in areas controlled by non-state entities continue to suffer religious freedom violations.

In Nigeria, religious communities have suffered historically from a lack of accountability from the government. In the northwest, violent insurgent groups attack Christian communities, and persecute Muslims as well. Due to Nigeria's size, population, and underdeveloped infrastructure, full and accurate data on these attacks and the religious communities they target are difficult to obtain. The information we do have, however, paints a disturbing picture. In 2022 in Plateau State, spiraling tensions between faith communities resulted in an attack on a convoy of Muslims, with deaths resulting on both sides. Armed bandits killed a Muslim Hausa woman and her children earlier that year. In 2024 in Zamfara State, bandits killed at least 49 people, many of them Muslim, including a religious community leader.

Some state governors have called for vigilante groups to protect local religious communities. But these groups lack state oversight and sometimes exacerbate conflict and mistrust. In March of this year, one such vigilante group summarily executed 16 Muslim travelers driving from Port Harcourt in the south for Eid al-Fitr celebrations in the north. The travelers had weapons for hunting but were unknown to locals who claimed incorrectly that they were bandits looking for kidnapping victims.

The government should also take accountability for Nigeria's indigenous religious communities. These communities are steeped in rich religious traditions spanning centuries. Yet today these communities also feel the pressure of persecution by their own governments. In July of last year, the Anambra state government demolished an indigenous shrine with deep meaning and spiritual significance to the local community. In Ebonoye State, the House of Assembly prohibited certain indigenous religious rites, citing a fear of violence. In other words, indigenous religious communities in Nigeria risk physical harm simply for practicing their religion.

And what about other communities including non-believers? USCIRF has also followed closely the case of Mubarak Bala. Mr. Bala, who was president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria when he was arrested in 2020 over a Facebook post, was originally sentenced to 24 years in prison, which was later reduced to

five. During his time in prison, he was denied medical care. But again, concerned groups around the world rallied for Mr. Bala and his right to practice his faith or no faith. Last August, he was finally released. And earlier this year, USCIRF participated in one of the first U.S. government meetings with Mr. Bala following his release. Just last week, Mr. Bala left Nigeria for Germany. Had he stayed in his native Nigeria, he faced the risk of possible future arrest on blasphemy charges or worse, a mob attack, simply because of his humanist religious beliefs.

USCIRF has long recommended the U.S. government invest in strengthening civil society to reduce conflict between religious communities, including in Nigeria.

Programs supporting protection for vulnerable religious minorities, reintegration of former fighters, and critical aid distributed by faith-based organizations offer powerful and cost-effective protections for freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria.

These initiatives have also provided lifesaving humanitarian assistance across religious communities in a country which is considered the lynchpin of stability in the Sahel region. USCIRF continues to recommend the U.S. administration redirect U.S. foreign assistance to the government of Nigeria to more effectively reduce violence against vulnerable religious communities.

In these technical policy discussions, we can often lose sight of the human side of religious freedom promotion. To help ground this morning's conversation, I turn to

my colleague, Commissioner Vicky Hartzler, to shed some light on the severe conditions religious communities in Nigeria are facing.

Vicky Hartzler, USCIRF Commissioner

Thank you Chair Schneck, it would be my pleasure. Thank you to our witnesses and to everyone here today to discuss what is happening to people of faith in Nigeria and to advocate for positive change.

This is one of the most important hearings we could be having as Nigeria has, unfortunately, been a slaughtering house for people of faith for far too long.

Groups like Genocide Watch have reported that “since 2000, 62,000 Christians in Nigeria have been victims of genocide perpetrated by Islamist extremist groups.”

This is horrific and the killings don’t seem to be slowing down.

Just this April, over Palm Sunday weekend, extremists murdered 54 Christians.

During the entire season of Lent and Easter, at least 170 Christians were killed.

North-central Nigeria is an area of particular concern where Fulani Muslim militants swarm in from neighboring countries and kill innocent Christians. In the Mangu district of Plateau State at least 100 Christians were killed in 16 villages the week of May 19.

Pastors report having to oversee mass burials on an all-too-often basis. One Bokokos area pastor, the Rev. Ayuba Matawal, shared with Christian Daily

International, that “Daily kidnappings, molestation and rape of Christian women, particularly in rural villages across north-central Nigeria, especially in the Plateau state, have become disturbingly common.”

One horrific attack involved 10 Christians being killed who were attending a wake at a home of another Christian who had been murdered. While they were praying, Fulani terrorists invaded the house, attacked the mourners, and killed seven women and three men using guns and machetes.

The Fulani herdsmen who often arrive on motorcycles not only kill, but also burn and loot. In one attack April 2 and 3 of this year, 60 Christians were killed in Plateau state and 383 houses were destroyed. Entire villages are often left destroyed or burned.

Many of the victims do not have guns to defend themselves and the military and police are slow to respond. Even when the villages receive an early warning and reach out to security officials, they often refuse to listen or provide needed protection.

This must stop!

But the horrific loss of life isn't the only issue. The predominately Christian farmers are driven from their lands and taken over by predominately Muslim Fulani herdsmen. The Christian farmers who survive the attacks lose their

livelihoods, their homes, their food security, and their way of life. It's an injustice that needs to be rectified. The government of Nigeria has created a new Ministry of Livestock Farming to try to mitigate any land-issues that could be a contributing factor in the attacks. Time will tell if this is effective or not.

Today's hearing is timely and needed. Everyone deserves to worship according to their deeply held beliefs without fear of reprisal.

I am hopeful the witnesses today will be able to shed some light on the situation and give concrete advice for what we can do through U.S. foreign policy to advocate for those who are suffering because of their faith.

Thank you and I turn to my colleague, Commissioner Maureen Ferguson.

Maureen Ferguson, USCIRF Commissioner

Thank you Commissioner Hartzler, it would be my pleasure. Thank you everyone for joining today. Religious freedom in Nigeria affects a multitude of communities, which include Christians, Muslims, indigenous religious communities, Jews, humanists, and others. When Nigeria's government enforces blasphemy laws, fails to prosecute those who attack religious minorities, and tolerates attacks on or harassment of Nigerians on the basis of their religious identity, all the members of these groups suffer.

Nigeria's challenges are the subject of deep analysis and policy debate. But it's also important we understand the human toll of religious freedom violations.

Individuals and communities continue to suffer profoundly at the hands of both governments and non-state actors. The stories of religious persecution in Nigeria are heartbreaking and too numerous to fully account for at today's hearing.

However, they stir us to act on behalf of those denied the right to freely and safely practice their faith.

Free religious practice in Nigeria is under siege. Imagine waking up on Sunday morning fearful that merely attending church could cost you your life.

Unfortunately, it's a reality many Nigerian Christians don't have to imagine.

Christmas violence in Plateau State in 2023 killed over 300 people in 160 villages.

Among them were 200 Christians, many preparing for holiday services. What for so many people around the world is a season of joy became, for Nigerian Christians, a horrific tragedy. The effects of this fear – for simply belonging to a religious community - are profound, and last years after the physical attacks.

Just last month, violent herdsmen from the Fulani population – most of whom are Muslim - killed at least 45 people and destroyed over 380 homes in several Christian villages in Plateau State. Nigerian President Bola Tinubu as well as the governor of Plateau State rightly condemned the attacks. However, Nigerians have criticized slow responses or outright government inaction in response to the

violence, which deeply affects religious communities. Catholic priests remain prime targets of kidnapping for ransom in Nigeria, even in the majority Christian southern states. In March, gangs abducted two Catholic priests in separate events. Fortunately, both are now free and were physically unharmed.

Some of the most tragic stories in Nigeria involve the kidnappings of girls, often on the basis of their religious identity. Many of us have followed with great concern the case of Leah Sharibu. Leah, a Nigerian Christian schoolgirl, was kidnapped by the Islamic State – West Africa Province (ISWAP) in 2018 along with 109 other girls in Yobe State. Leah was only 14 years old when she was taken from her family and friends. Her loved ones endure every day without knowledge of Leah's wellbeing, suffering immeasurable grief, unsure if they will ever again feel her embrace or hear her voice.

Sadly, other families have lived the certainty of a final goodbye. Deborah Yakubu was a Christian college student studying home economics. She was murdered on a college campus in Sokoto State in 2022 over suspicions of blasphemy. Deborah died at the hands of a violent mob, which stoned her to death before setting her body on fire. All this for an alleged WhatsApp voice note deemed insulting to Islam.

Thankfully, a few recent stories have had happier endings, though they still reflect systematic shortcomings by Nigeria's government. Rhoda Jatau, a Christian nurse, was arrested on blasphemy charges for a social media post and was thrown in prison. She spent months away from her husband and her five children. In response, civil society and governmental entities, including USCIRF, expressed concern for her wellbeing. Thanks to these concerted efforts, Jatau was released in December 2023. Because of USCIRF's advocacy, the U.S. government held its very first meeting with Ms. Jatau this year in Nigeria. But she should never have been subjected to this prosecution in the first place. The government detained her for well over a year for simply expressing her opinion.

These stories are poignant reminders that in Nigeria, blasphemy laws and their enforcement are not esoteric legal issues. They are tools the government actively uses to suppress religious freedom. No person should be thrown in jail for a social media post about their nonviolent religious beliefs. And when this does occur, using our voice matters. The United States is uniquely positioned for global leadership on this issue, reaffirming its unwavering commitment to advancing freedom of religion or belief abroad.

I'll now turn it back to Chair Schneck to introduce our panelists.

Stephen Schneck, USCIRF Chair

Thank you, Commissioner Ferguson, for shedding light on some of these concerning religious freedom conditions. I would now like to introduce our witnesses. For our first panel, we are delighted to welcome back former Congressman and former USCIRF Commissioner Frank Wolf, a champion of religious freedom without whom our commission literally would not exist. We will also have the pleasure of hearing from Samah Norquist, Former Chief Advisor for International Religious Freedom to the Administrator of USAID. On our second panel of experts, we will hear from Dr. Jumo Ayandele, Visiting Assistant Professor of Practice at New York University's Center for Global Affairs. We'll then hear from Zakaria Bulus, a Fellow at the University of Michigan's Gerald Ford School of Public Policy. Finally, we'll hear remarks from Shamsuddeen Magaji Bello a scholar at the Ohio University and Muslim Founder of Kebbi Community Action.

Thank you all for being here. It is now my distinct honor to welcome back to USCIRF Mr. Frank Wolf, who I now invite to give his testimony.