

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

HEARING ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN NIGERIA:
EXTREMISM AND GOVERNMENT INACTION

Wednesday, June 9, 2021

10:30 a.m. ET

Virtual Hearing

P A R T I C I P A N T S

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P R O C E E D I N G S

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Good morning, and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing today on "Religious Freedom in Nigeria: Extremism and Government Inaction." I would like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body, created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. We are honored today to have the author of IRFA, Congressman Frank Wolf, with us.

The Commission uses international standards to monitor the freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the United States government.

Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

USCIRF has monitored religious freedom

conditions in Nigeria for two decades, and since 2009 has recommended the Secretary of State designate Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern, or CPC, for engaging in ongoing, systematic, and egregious violations of religious freedom. Unfortunately, Nigerians continue to face significant obstacles in exercising their right to the freedom of religion or belief.

Nigeria, home to nearly 220 million people, boasts tremendous religious diversity--with approximately half the population identifying as Muslim and nearly half identifying as Christian.

Nigerians also express Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Baha'i, and atheist beliefs, among others. The Nigerian constitution, adopted in 1999 during the country's transition to democratic rule, protects freedom of religion for all citizens.

Yet, as USCIRF has consistently documented, in practice, many Nigerians face opposition in exercising this right.

In December, the State Department

designated Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern for the first time. Nigeria is the first secular democracy to have received this designation from the State Department.

I will now turn it over to Vice Chair Perkins to discuss some of the religious freedom challenges in Nigeria that bring us together today for this hearing.

Thank you very much.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you, Chair Bhargava, and I would like to join in welcoming you all to today's hearing.

Today, we'll explore some of the most common religious freedom violations Nigerians face, along with possible solutions for addressing the violence targeting religious communities.

In many areas of Nigeria, non-state actors attack religious leaders and houses of worship with impunity and abduct and execute individuals based on their religious identity. This includes militant Islamist groups like Boko Haram and the

Islamic State in West Africa, both of which the State Department has designated as entities of particular concern for religious freedom violations in line with USCIRF's recommendations.

Islamic State in West Africa Province, or ISWAP, has held Leah Sharibu hostage for more than four years, simply for refusing to renounce her Christian faith. Leah Sharibu turned 18 years old this year, and she is one that I advocate for as a part of our Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project.

Boko Haram attacked three Christian communities in northern Nigeria on Christmas Eve, and just last month, armed assailants attacked two Muslim congregations worshipping at mosques during Ramadan.

Unknown gunmen recently stormed a church and abducted a pastor in Ondo state, demonstrating the alarming spread of these types of attacks into the south of the country.

Now in many parts of the country,

religious identity intersects with ethnicity and politics to fuel retaliatory cycles of identity-based violence resulting in thousands of civilian deaths each year.

In addition, Shari'a courts in the north of the country have upheld blasphemy laws against Muslim minorities, and authorities have illegally detained individuals based on their religious beliefs and expression.

For example, authorities in Kano state continue to hold human rights activist Mubarak Bala in detention for expressing his atheist beliefs despite a federal court order issued in December declaring his detention unconstitutional and demanding his release.

One of USCIRF's commissioners, Fred Davie, advocates for a Religious Prisoner of Conscience, Mubarak Bala, in our program. Now Davie also advocates for a Nigerian Islamic gospel musician Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, who is currently imprisoned for allegedly violating blasphemy laws.

Now urgent action is needed to reduce these violations and hold perpetrators accountable. Today we've assembled an expert panel of witnesses, and based upon their testimonies discussing these issues, we hope that we will be able to provide some solid recommendations to the U.S. government that they can implement to better support the Nigerian people that are facing these atrocities on an ongoing basis.

I'll now turn the floor back over to Chair Bhargava to introduce our witnesses for today's hearing.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you so much, Vice Chair Perkins.

We have such an extraordinary group of witnesses and experts to share their perspectives on working in Nigeria with us today.

I'm really honored to be able to start our introductions with Frank Wolf, and, as I mentioned, Congressman Wolf, the author of the International Religious Freedom Act. He served in the U.S. House

of Representatives from Virginia for 17 terms and has been a champion of work on human rights and religious freedom for so many of us.

He among other things not only authored IRFA, was in that way the force that created the International Religious Freedom Office at the State Department, headed by the Ambassador-at-Large, and USCIRF itself.

And so he founded and served as the co-chairman of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, which has been an extraordinary partner in this work, and among other things is part of the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative, where he retired in 2018 as a Distinguished Senior Fellow, but in many ways continued to catalyze the ways in which we are trying to engender interest and focus in Congress and other places on religious freedom internationally.

He is going to start off today, and then we're going to turn to Mike Jobbins, who leads Global Affairs and Partnerships at Search for

Common Ground, where he designs, develops, and manages conflict resolution, violence prevention, and inclusive governance programs, particularly in 22 countries around Africa.

And then we will turn to Hafsat Maina Muhammed, who leads the Choice for Peace, Gender and Development, COPGAD, in Nigeria, which specializes in eradicating conditions that allow for violent extremist behavior of at-risk youth, women's development, and empowerment for young girls, and promotes positive messages to the younger generation.

Prior to moving to the United States, Hafsat worked tirelessly at the Interfaith Mediation Center in Kaduna.

We will then turn to Father Anthony Bature, who is among other things the author of The Quest for Peace and Development in Wukari, Promoting Peace Education in Nigeria: A Case Study on Building a Paradigm for Peace, Peace Education, and Development. And he has contributed to many

articles in national and international journals.

He is currently the Head of Development of Religious Studies and the Chaplain of St. Francis of Assisi Chaplaincy at the Federal University of Technology in Wukari.

Tomas Husted is an Analyst in African Affairs at the Congressional Research Service where he covers the countries of West and Central Africa, and prior to joining CRS, he worked with the International Rescue Committee in Sierra Leone, the National Democratic Institute, and the Enough Project.

I hope you will join us all in welcoming this extraordinary set of witnesses today, and let me turn to Congressman Frank Wolf.

MR. WOLF: I want to thank the commissioners and I want to thank the Commission staff for having this hearing and for the good work that they do.

All you have to do is to read the May 31st article in Foreign Affairs magazine by former

Ambassador John Campbell and Robert Rotberg, titled "The Giant of Africa is Failing."

Ambassador Campbell is now with the Council on Foreign Relations. Mr. Rotberg is president emeritus of the World Peace Foundation.

Nigeria is the largest country in Africa with roughly 219 million people. In fact, in the year 2050, there will be more people in Nigeria than there will be here in the United States.

And the article says, quote: "That is why state failure in Nigeria is having profound consequences for the entire region and beyond. It bodes especially ill for the stability and well-being of weak states in Nigeria's vicinity, as evidenced by the spread of jihadi and criminal groups to Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Ivory Coast, Mali and Niger."

In Nigeria today, there is genocide by Boko Haram, genocide activity by Fulani militants. There's rampant hunger, according to the World Food Program. There is little or no education in many

parts of the country. There is sexual trafficking. There is massive, massive government corruption. There's human rights abuses by the military and mass, mass migration out of Nigeria.

And we see little action by the West, including the United States. We can talk about how bad things are, but I want to offer and suggest two recommendations to deal with this issue.

First, our government needs trusted input that could help U.S. policymakers to achieve mitigation and ultimate solutions. The idea stood out from the pages of Robert Kaplan's latest book--one of the best books I've read--The Good American--the Epic Life of Bob Gersony, the U.S. Government's Greatest Humanitarian.

Bob Gersony is an independent consultant who has provided the State Department and USAID decision-makers over the years with indispensable ground-truth information to help deal with major international humanitarian crises both under Republican and Democratic administrations.

Bob Gersony has agreed to travel to Nigeria and provide a report, if asked by the State Department or USAID.

My second recommendation is that I believe we need a Special Envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad region.

The problems of Nigeria have spilled over into the neighboring countries--Ambassador Campbell's article covers it--of the Lake Chad region.

Boko Haram, Fulani militants, and ISIS are now operating in these countries. The Special Envoy would work with all of the American ambassadors in Nigeria and the surrounding countries as well. The Special Envoy can coordinate the U.S. response to the crisis by various agencies of our government and will work with our European allies and also with the U.N. and other international agencies, such as the World Food Program.

There is precedent for a Special Envoy.

In the year 2001, President Bush appointed former Senator John Danforth to be the Special Envoy for Sudan. This was a very, very successful effort.

In a Wall Street Journal article in December 2019, Bernard Henri Levy said that what is happening in Nigeria could lead to a Darfur or a Rwanda.

When the world and the U.S. ignored--and the world did ignore it--America ignored it--the U.N. ignored it--genocide in Rwanda, hundreds of thousands of people died. History is repeating itself.

Because of the atrocities in Rwanda that we have ignored, President Bill Clinton flew to Rwanda and apologized to the Rwandan people near the end of his term.

If what is happening in Nigeria were happening in any country in Europe, the world would be enraged and engaged, but in Nigeria, there is no action.

In the 20th century, 19th century, British

Parliamentarian William Wilberforce said this to his fellow countrymen about the evils of the slave trade. Wilberforce said you may choose to look the other way, but you can never again say you do not know. We do now know what's taking place in Nigeria so we can't pretend that we do not.

And Dr. Martin Luther King said: In the end, we remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends. Are we not in the United States friends of all the people in Nigeria? And a friend, a German Lutheran pastor and anti-Nazi dissident, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, said: Silence in the face of evil is evil itself. He said not to speak is really to speak and not to act is to act.

So I ask the Commission to act boldly and support these recommendations for the sake of all the people of Nigeria.

And again thank you very much.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you very much, Congressman Wolf.

Let me turn it over to Mike Jobbins.

MR. JOBBINS: Thank you, Chairwoman Bhargava, Vice Chair Perkins, and all my fellow panelists and esteemed commissioners, and particularly, Frank Wolf, Congressman, for all of your excellent service on this issue.

I'd like to add my voice to yours in calling attention to really what ought to be a top priority, in my opinion, of the administration.

As Chairwoman Bhargava said in the introduction, I serve for Search for Common Ground, an international peace-building organization committed to Nigeria. We have one hundred colleagues across the country, all of whom are very deeply concerned, care, and engaged on this issue.

That said, my opinions are mine alone, and in the interest of brevity, I'll also refer the commissioners and participants to my written submission for the website.

I want to focus on three things. First, in terms of the gravity of the situation, to build on what Congressman Wolf said, it's hard to

underestimate the level of severity of the current crisis.

In the last year, 8,668 people were killed in armed attacks. That's one every hour on average, or, in other words, two will be killed by the end of this hearing as a result of the ongoing violence.

Not all this violence is directly attributable to violent extremism. Not all of it is attributable to the kinds of rural violence that we're seeing unfolding in the Middle Belt, but a lot of it is. And so I'll focus on three key dynamics that I think all of us should take into account and take to heart in terms of why action is necessary and why action is particularly necessary now.

The first is in the northeast of the country, we've seen a transformation of the Boko Haram phenomenon with the rise in increasing activity by ISWAP, the Islamic State affiliate in the region.

At present, significant amounts of the population are living under their control, government control, and much of the population is confined to the network of about 45 garrison towns, or cantonments, throughout that region. We've seen the particular use of religious discriminatory tactics and religiously motivated violence by ISWAP, particularly in the last six to nine months, an increase in so-called "stop and search" activities where public buses, taxis are stopped, people are looked at for their presumed religious identity, based on their national identity cards, and then Christians are taken away, abducted or killed. So we've seen in the northeast, particularly concerning.

In the rest of the country, we saw a phenomenon of rural violence, both criminal, intercommunal and natural resource-based conflict, that began in north central, in the Middle Belt, over the past few years, really grow significantly over the past, in recent years, and so today,

almost every geopolitical zone of Nigeria is affected from the Delta to the Southeast. We saw, just this week, attacks by unidentified gunmen in Igangan, in the Southwest, which had not experienced that level of violence, in particular, escalations in the northwest of the country.

We're in an escalatory cycle where the combination of an economic crash, triggered by COVID and low oil prices, has led the price of food to double in the markets. You have increasingly desperate people. You have increasingly cynical criminal and political actors eager to cast their materialistic and personal interests in the cloak of religion and ethnicity, and you have a context of a security force that's overstretched with the military deployed in more than two-thirds in active military operations in more than two-thirds of Nigeria states.

So it's an incredibly fractious situation where the trend lines are all favoring escalation in, as Congressman Wolf said, Africa's largest

economy, one of America's deepest partners, whom we do \$10 billion of trade each year, and a country where more children are born each year than the entire Middle East put together.

So this is a critical moment, a critical point, for the U.S. to act, and as we do, I'm particularly pleased to have both Father Bature and Hafsat coming after me to highlight the fact that there are a number of positive efforts underway by Nigerian civil society activists, faith leaders, media professionals, and it's around those kind of efforts that the U.S. should be rallying its support.

And so as I close, I'd like to leave you and this group with five recommendations for both the Biden Administration as well as leaders in both chambers of Congress.

The first is that in both analysis and public messaging, it's absolutely vital that all external actors right-size, draw attention to this crisis and right-size the role of religion therein.

Overstating the role of religion feeds the flames and fans the interests of those who are using or trying to co-opt religion for their own violent purposes.

On the other hand, talking past the conflict, claiming it in terms of immutable long-term trends that doesn't draw sufficient attention to the way that identity-based motivations are taking place disrespects the victims and also is analytically dishonest.

Two, both Congress and the Administration need to budget appropriately. Less than three percent of foreign assistance to Nigeria goes to peace and security. That needs to change, and we need efforts both like the Peace Prevention and Security Fund to support long-term stabilization.

We need democracy, human rights and governance efforts and assistance to go to Nigeria, and we need some of the rapid response mechanisms that Congress makes available to the President, the Complex Crisis Fund, the Atrocities Prevention

Fund, to enable the State Department and enable USAID to support good work of the kind that we're about to hear from Hafsat and Father Bature.

Third, we need a whole-of-government response. I was pleased to hear the creative ideas laid out by Congressman Wolf, and there is enormous opportunity for the Administration to think creatively about how we rally the whole of the U.S. government to support this.

Economic frustrations, deep security and injustice are things that aren't necessarily within the human rights toolbox, and yet we know that USDA is a key agricultural partner for rural security. We know that USDFC is playing a key role in terms of shoring up investments and creating a better future for the people affected by this conflict.

And so we need to see how we use the full amount of both conflict and human rights tools in line with the economic instruments.

And then, finally, I think the last two that I would highlight, one is to focus on the role

of the cultural heritage and conservation. Destroyed holy sites that Congressman Wolf and Vice Chair Perkins alluded to need to be rebuilt. There's a tremendous opportunity through the Ambassador's Self-Help Fund, through the Smithsonian and other kinds of institutions that have particular expertise in rebuilding and restoring holy sites.

And then, finally, again, building on Congressman Wolf's suggestion, we fundamentally need a conflict geography approach. We know that many of the perpetrators of violence in Nigeria are not from Nigeria, and we know that they are deeply enmeshed across the Sahel and into littoral states and illicit networks, movements of armed men and goods and smuggling, and there needs to be a wider approach.

Typically, the U.S. divides between sort of the Francophone Sahel and Anglophone Nigeria as policymaking. There's a particular need to integrate those two and arrive at a common vision

and program.

So I thank you very much for inviting me and I look forward to the questions and discussion.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you so much, Mike.

I want to turn now to Hafsat.

MS. MUHAMMED: Good morning, everybody.

I've introduced myself already. But for those who do not know me, I am Hafsat Maina Muhammed, again, and I am the founder of Choice for Peace, Gender and Development in Nigeria, and I'm based here in Maryland now.

I've worked with a lot of religious organizations and the community back in Nigeria and the government, in ensuring that we bring peace or we have a dialogue setting where people can safely have a safe haven to speak about their religious differences or religious opinions, and it's acceptable with no, no bias or intimidation or prosecution.

I come from the northeastern part of Nigeria, Borno State to be precise, and Gwoza local

government.

I'm going to keep this short with a short story. You know, it's going to be like short stories. So when I was back in Nigeria, I faced persecution from Boko Haram and also persecution from the governments, mainly because, one, I'm a woman, and then, number two, I'm a Muslim. So apparently there's a way a Muslim woman should behave or act or be in the society.

Holton and Cotes [ph], the religious leaders there, but in the northern part of Nigeria say I am too, I am too educated, and I am too outspoken, which I shouldn't be. I am telling you this because I can go ahead and read what I wrote in my testimony, but this is the reality of how it sticks with me and how I'm living with it.

It's something that everyday I ask why was I persecuted because I'm a Muslim woman and why should I have to act the way they want me to act or believe what they want me to believe?

Boko Haram unleashed mayhem in my local

government, in the states, in the whole region, and to me personally. I have been a victim of rape from these people. I've been a victim of beating, of brutal beating. I've been a victim of their incarcerations and I've escaped severely. I call myself a "cat with nine lives," if that makes sense.

But this is not, this is to say that many women and many people in Nigeria, especially in the northeastern part of Nigeria, regardless of their faith, and this is what I believe based on research and what I've seen, regardless of them being Muslims or Christians, have faced persecution and are still facing persecutions.

A lot of them are still there because they have nowhere to go. They have nothing to turn to. So in the end, they are stuck where they are. I am privileged to be out of the situation that I once thought I would never come out alive from.

A lot of people, especially women, especially Muslim women, are degraded or subjected

to what the society wants them to be subjected to, and thus they turn to terrorists. A lot of them have turned to this jihadist or Boko Haram, you know, to give them succor because they want to be safe, and this is wrong at all levels.

So what I did back in Nigeria before I came was try to see that we have a communication where they would understand that they do not have to turn to this. They can still, you know, live with their dignity. But how do you tell a poor woman or a poor widow or orphans or female orphans that they could do that when they are hungry, they feel unsafe, there's a lot of insecurity, and they are being murdered and slaughtered in front of their peers?

This is what I've seen. This is what-- this has happened in my eyes, in front of me, where women are cut open and babies are taken out of them, and I would have to run to the bush or to the forest to pick up these babies and go take them somewhere.

I did it single-handedly. Do I want to be praised for it? No. But a lot of these things, the government in Nigeria we know for far too long is not working. The laws are not working. Thus, these things keep happening. For me, I believe, yes, there is religious intolerance, but it's not about Islam, it's not about Christianity, it's not about Hinduism, or Buddhism. It's about a people that cannot that cannot come together to live in peace and understand each other respectfully.

There is lack of tolerance. There is lack of mediation. People in Nigeria government and terrorists and jihadists, they want to inflict pain by forcing people to believe what they believe or act the way they want them to act.

The U.S. government has been in Nigeria for a very long time. Nigeria, it's a partner, you know, with the U.S. government. What I'm saying, what I want to say here, really short, and this is what I would say finally, is that the U.S. government needs to focus on the Nigerian

government, and I don't know, educating them perhaps or bringing them to highlight of saying communicate with your people, go down to the grassroots. They can't stay in the office in the Aso Villa and expect things to work.

So there is no religious freedom. So people are prosecuted. Bala is still incarcerated, and lots of people who do not believe in anything, you know, because the Nigerian government feels it can do and undo from its bedside, and there is no accountability, no transparency.

Thank you.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you, Hafsat, and thank you for sharing your experiences firsthand.

I want to now turn to Father Bature, who I believe is on. We may have just lost him, and if so, I will turn to Tomas. Let me turn to you if that works for you, and then I will come back to Father Bature.

MR. HUSTED: Okay. Thank you.

So many thanks to the Commission for the

invitation to join this discussion on religious freedom in Nigeria, and, as requested, I will focus my attention on non-state threats to religious freedom, selected U.S. responses, and potential considerations for U.S. policymakers.

Successive administrations have described the U.S. relationship with Nigeria as among the most important in Africa. Nevertheless, U.S. policymakers have expressed concern over threats to religious freedom in Nigeria, particularly in the predominantly Muslim north and in the religiously and ethnically diverse Middle Belt region, which lies between the north and the majority Christian south.

In recent years, U.S. officials have focused attention on two trends regarding non-state threats to religious freedom. Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province attacks in the northeast targeting Muslim and Christian individuals, ceremonies, and houses of worship, and disputes in the Middle Belt between predominantly

Christian farmers and mainly Muslim pastoralists, which while generally not primarily driven by religious ideology, according to various analyses, can assume religious dimensions and spur violence along sectarian lines.

Security responses generally have proven insufficient to protect local civilians from these threats.

In the northeast, the government has periodically reasserted control over contested territory. Security gains often have been short-lived, however, and security services have been implicated in extensive abuses.

In the Middle Belt, farmer-herder clashes and related violence often have outstripped responses by military and law enforcement, and observers have accused security services of committing abuses, abandoning villages before the onset of violence, and failing to prosecute assailants.

Several factors arguably have constrained

the government's responses to insecurity. Defense sector corruption has reportedly impaired effectiveness.

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has assessed it, quote: "Decades of unchecked corruption have hollowed out the Nigerian military and security services and rendered them unable to effectively combat Boko Haram or address ethno-religious and communal conflict." Unquote.

According to the State Department, insufficient capacity and staffing of domestic law enforcement agencies also have inhibited security efforts and resulted in a reliance on the military to respond to internal security threats.

Meanwhile, many observers contend that efforts to stabilize conflict-affected zones and address core drivers of insecurity have been slow and inadequate.

In the northeast, corruption, poor coordination, low political commitment, and human rights abuses have been seen to hinder efforts to

build trust in the government, improve service delivery, reintegrate former combatants, and foster cohesion.

Attempts to develop enduring solutions to farmer-herder conflicts also have faced challenges as implementation of a national livestock transformation plan, intended to help address resource disputes, has experienced delays, resource shortages, and opposition from both farmers and pastoralists.

U.S. foreign aid programs in Nigeria have sought to help mitigate intercommunal tensions, address the causes of militant recruitment and respond to insecurity.

In the north and Middle Belt, for instance, the United States has funded programs focused on preventing violence and supporting intercommunal and interfaith dialogue. The United States also has provided security assistance to help strengthen Nigeria's counterterrorism responses and civilian law enforcement capacity in

the northeast.

The State Department also has publicly expressed concern with the government's insufficient actions to protect religious freedom. In 2019, it placed Nigeria on a Special Watch List under the International Religious Freedom Act, and in 2020 downgraded Nigeria to a Country of Particular Concern, or CPC, for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

The specific grounds for Nigeria's CPC designation were not made public. In addition to the non-state threats I have discussed, recent State Department reports on religious freedom in Nigeria also have highlighted state repression of the minority Shi'a community and concerns related to the Sharia legal system in the north, among other issues.

Designation as a CPC can result in various punitive measures, subject to a presidential waiver. The Trump Administration waived these for

Nigeria, citing the "important national interest of the United States."

Some policymakers and advocates have supported Nigeria's CPC designation and have called for punitive action such as sanctions.

Several considerations may shape U.S. responses to religious freedom conditions in Nigeria. Where violations of religious freedom stem from intercommunal violence, as in the Middle Belt, several factors may precipitate or stoke conflict.

The State Department attributes farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt to land disputes, competition over dwindling resources, ethnic differences, and settler-indigene tensions, while assessing that ethnocultural and religious affiliation contributed to and exacerbated some local conflicts.

Some non-governmental organizations have described ethnic or religious motivations as a central driver of such violence. U.S. policymakers

may debate the role of ethno-religious divisions vis-a-vis other factors, and the suitability of viewing such conflicts as primarily ethnic or sectarian in nature.

More broadly, U.S. policymakers may debate the relative merit of various policy tools for reducing threats to religious freedom in Nigeria. Punitive measures targeting the Nigerian government, such as aid restrictions or targeted sanctions on Nigerian officials, could publicly reinforce U.S. concern about such threats and enact a cost on those perceived as responsible.

Such measures also could impede pursuit of other U.S. policy goals, such as counterterrorism cooperation or diplomatic access and influence in other arenas.

Increased U.S. security assistance might help Nigerian authorities restore security, but may also come into conflict with U.S. concerns over human rights abuses by Nigerian security personnel, which have constrained past U.S. security

cooperation.

Policymakers may continue to debate whether U.S. engagement reflects an appropriate balance of approaches and resources for reducing threats to religious freedom in Nigeria.

Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to speak with you, and I look forward to your questions.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you so much, Tomas.

And I believe we now have Father Bature back with us, and so let me turn it to you, Father. Father, I believe you are still muted.

REV. BATURE: Yes.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Okay. Great.

REV. BATURE: Okay. So I don't want to go into the academic part of this paper, but rather to--can you hear me--

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Yes.

REV. BATURE: Can you hear me?

CHAIR BHARGAVA: We can hear you and see you too.

REV. BATURE: Yes. I said I don't want to go into the academic part of this hearing. I just want to be very practical on what is happening because I'm on ground. As a Nigerian, I'm also familiar with what is happening.

Freedom of religion is considered by many people in most nations to be a fundamental human right. Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remain very poor, with both state and societal perpetrated violations. This, however, prompted former U.S. Secretary of--[audio cuts out]--

CHAIR BHARGAVA: I believe that we're having some trouble with Father Bature.

REV. BATURE: --group or society.

Undoubtedly, Nigeria maintains a delicate balance between Muslims and Christians. The apparent religious sentiments and sectarianism, manifest in religious loyalties and intolerance, seem to fuel insecurity and thus constitute a huge hindrance to social cohesion among the various religious groups in Nigeria.

There are incidents of religious extremism in Nigeria, which is often not heard in the media, but I would like to highlight these incidents of religious extremism.

One, religious membership of OIC, which is against secularism as enshrined in the constitution of Nigeria.

And then we have application of Sharia in northern Nigeria to citizens and foreign nationals who are not Muslims by faith.

The spillover of religious affairs into government decisions leading to poor government domestic and international policies.

Overemphasis on Sharia law in the Nigeria constitution as we heard from other speakers.

Lack of social justice or fair equality of opportunity for all to thrive in their identified areas of strength.

Then here is where I mentioned about the religious extremism and government inaction. Denial of places of worship for the Christians in

some part of northern Nigeria institution and state. And to build a church is never allowed in some places of worship, for worship.

Of course there are far more serious conflict issues, and one of the prominent issues that affects us, especially in Nigeria, which is causing conflict between Christians and Muslims, is what I refer to as wide martyrdom, where our young Christian girls are being taken over for marriage by our Muslim brothers, no recourse to parents, no parental consent, and that has been creating problems.

And lands that have been located in some cases have been revoked for religious purposes. And government inactions since exacerbated the crisis. You will recall that General TY Danjuma did mention a year-and-a-half ago that there are issues that people need to protect themselves, community needs to protect themselves, because the government is no longer going to protect them.

So the constitution of Nigeria itself,

which talks about secularity and not acceptance or taking of one religion over the other seems to give prevalence to the Islamic religion over Christianity, and that has been creating problems in Nigeria.

So the introduction of the Islamic legal code, popularly known as Sharia, which some of us besides myself talked about, by the then Governor Ahmed Yarima of Zamfar state, in 1999, resulted in violent protests, and this has escalated in 2000 when the then Governor Ahmed Makarfi initiated the process of introducing the same law in Kaduna state.

Evidently, Nigerians have waited too long for the violence orchestrated by religious intolerance to stop. Rather it has been escalating.

Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria deteriorated over the past decade. In fact, the ongoing attacks against Christian communities, Muslim congregations, and houses of worship in most

parts of the northeast and north central geopolitical zones of Nigeria is very worrisome.

There are reports that more than 600 students have been abducted from schools in northwest Nigeria since December 2020 to date. These abductions perpetrated by armed criminal gangs resemble tactics commonly employed by Boko Haram and other militant Islamic groups in northern Nigeria.

The killing of the Adamawa CAN chairman, the Christian Association of Nigeria chairman, who was kidnapped and executed by Boko Haram terrorists, the government seems not to have done anything about it. And this has created a lot of loss of hope on the government of the federation.

We have the recent one, which was just a priest, Father Alphonsus Bello of Sokoto Diocese was gruesomely murdered by bandits in his own parish, and up till now nothing was done to apprehend the culprit or meted any judicial justice. All this built up to high level of mutual

suspicion, rivalry, acrimony, discord and hostility among the religious adherents.

Nigerians no longer have peace, and they cannot live in peace. So I want to truly concur with what we have rightly mentioned, and quoting Martin Luther King, Jr., that we cannot claim not to know what is going on in Nigeria.

Thank you very much.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you so much, Father Bature.

We're going to now open it up to questions from the commissioners. I want to thank you each for sharing so much of the work that you have been engaged in for many decades in Nigeria and the experiences that you've each had directly in trying to promote religious freedom and the ability of everyone to be able to exercise their faith.

So I'm going to start with an initial question, which is one that I think we have struggled with at the Commission for quite some time, which is that there are many--there's so much

complexity to the violence in Nigeria.

There are many, many factors that underlie this, and Mike spoke to this earlier, which is that when we're trying to think about religion in the context of tribe, ethnicity, region, gender, as Hafsat spoke to, the expectations that are associated with that, how do we, how do we think about giving proper recognition to the role that religion plays without exacerbating religious divides, without making it more than it should be in the context of trying to address the kind of violence that has been associated with religion?

And so I know it's a complex question. It's one that we, we are often trying to figure out how we, how we focus on religion, and yet also account for the many factors that go into the kind of violence and persecution that we're seeing around the country.

So I will open it up with that difficult question to Congressman Wolf and to others who have spoken to that for quite some time, but would

welcome anyone's responses on that question.

MR. WOLF: Thank you.

That's why I made the recommendations with regard to Bob Gersony, first of all, because you need a truth-based environment where you really know what's going on.

Bob Gersony, who actually lives in Northern Virginia, has actually agreed to do this if asked by the State Department or AID. Bob Gersony, he was the one who did all of the work with regard to the Lord's Resistance Army. He's worked in Mozambique.

So I think you need a person who understands, who is not partisan, on a truth-based, to really find out what's going on.

Secondly, I think that's why we need this Special Envoy. When the Special Envoy was appointed, it was supported in the Congress by both Republicans and Democrats. I believe Speaker Pelosi was very supportive of this. Everyone was because you had John Danforth, who has such

credibility, and he was able to coordinate all the aspects of our government.

It isn't just one person doing one thing. What are you going to do at the DID? What are you going to do with the World Food Program? What about the USAID? What about U.S. Agriculture? So a combination of Bob Gersony going there, who has a reputation of working with ambassadors, not a person who is going to upset things, to really come back with the truth-based what's really going on based on the experience.

And I urge people, please, please, read Kaplan's book, but, secondly, then, as somebody who has the confidence of the president because John Danforth was a United States senator, he was well-respected by Colin Powell. He was able to pick up the phone and call Secretary Powell. So I think you need those two things to kind of deal with it. We can talk about how bad it is, what some of the problems are, but the question is how do you resolve what they are and what do you actually do

about it?

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you, Congressman.

And do others have thoughts on this question of how to actually disentangle or find ways in which to focus on religion that doesn't exacerbate or give too much credence to the way in which religion plays a role?

MR. JOBBINS: I might point to three suggestions in addition to those from Congressman Wolf.

One is, as Father Bature highlighted, there are a number of other questions related to religious freedom in Nigeria that aren't necessarily explicitly linked to the armed violence or in different kinds of ways. So questions about Sharia law and customary law and how that fits alongside Article 38 of the Nigerian constitution that guarantees freedom of religion, conscience and thought.

So there's a set of questions that can also be looked at and ought also to be looked at

beyond only the violence, but the violence is certainly important.

The second is, is I would encourage both the U.S. in its own analytical capacities but also in its support to the Nigerian civil society and other institutions to look for, to place a greater emphasis on supporting documentation.

The Nigerian press and international reporting based on the Nigerian press is full of reports by unidentified gunmen. Unidentified gunman attacked in this location, and that location, and often with the presumption that this group or that group was responsible.

Sometimes that's true, sometimes that's not true, sometimes it's manipulated by one or the other cases, in many cases, themselves in terms of who, who, where the fingers are pointing. And so there needs to be a greater investment in evidence in research, and particularly in criminal justice and accountability.

And regardless of the causes of, you know,

the triggers of violence in the Middle Belt are in many cases natural resource-based or historically have been natural resource-based, but they're occurring on the backdrop of very grave inter-religious and inter-ethnic riots in Jos, in Kaduna, in Kano, and elsewhere.

And to the extent that there's not accountability for past incidents of religious violence, it feeds the dynamic where both real memory by, lived memories by humans who have experienced it, but also it feeds into a narrative that incentivizes and creates a channel for any would-be criminal, any bandit, any political operator, to say remember what happened and use that as a way to rally support to their own cause.

And then, finally, often when we talk about religion in Nigeria, there's naturally a focus on the ills, but, you know, really different for each of us, and everyone has their own personal faith and the structure. You know, faith brings both a set of world views and values, and in many

cases, they acknowledge the sacred across societies and across space.

And we know separate from the wider social issues and conflicts, the Nigerian people themselves, three-quarters of them see diversity as a source of strength in communities. We see that Nigerians of faith have mutual respect across that at an ordinary citizen level.

So there's a tremendous opportunity to invest in engagement in faith communities, and I know Father Bature leads some. Hafsat's work with Interfaith Mediation Center, another excellent organization, and there's a number of other ways to invest and work with and alongside religious institutions as part of the solution and not only as part of the problem in a way that's equitable, in a way that's aligned with our own First Amendment.

But I would highlight at least those three: a focus on solutions; a focus on accountability; and then, finally, making sure that

we're sort of right-sizing the frame in the context of wider challenges to religious freedom in the country.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you, Mike.

Anyone else? Hafsat, I know you raised some questions about this, the role of religion, so I will--you can--I can leave that till later on and to the questions I know that are coming from other commissioners, or if you or others want to speak now, please do.

All right. If not, let me turn to Vice Chair Perkins, and then we'll turn to some of the other commissioners.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Well, thank you, Chair Bhargava.

That was exactly kind of what I wanted to zero in on with Hafsat because in her comments, she said that this really was not Christian-Islam religious, but the conflict was really driven by intolerance.

So I wanted to kind of better understand

what was fomenting that intolerance? Was that coming from government policy? Was it coming from the different world views that were made reference to? So just trying to better understand what is behind that.

MS. MUHAMMED: Thank you, chairman.

Well, what drives that, why I said intolerance is because back then when I was growing up, there was so much tolerance between Christians and Muslims where during Christmas, we would have food, we would have, you know, dance parties. We would go to the event with no problem at all whatsoever.

Our parents would literally take us there. I remember my dad, as an eight-year-old, when I was eight-year-old, he told me, he said they're your brothers. He never, he never identified my Christian, our Christian neighbors as neighbors. He called them our relatives. He called them our family.

And this is how I was raised, and I was

raised, you know, to even sing in the choir. He never had issues with it, and so many Muslim families I've seen interrelated and co-marriages and whatever, you know, it's so much beauty back when I was growing up.

So there was so much tolerance then. There was so much love, so much respect for each other, and you will see the Christians coming to our Eid parties, trying to do Ramadan with us, respecting the way we behave or act or our, or the way we do things, our timidness, our, our, you know, our timidness, our shyness, they respected it. They never had issues with it.

But today it's an issue. It's a big problem for me to even put my hijab on in Nigeria, a country that is known, especially northern Nigeria, that is known for this. Women are known for this. It's a problem. It's a problem. We're being mocked. We're being disgraced. We're being harassed.

A lot of women are being harassed. So

there is no tolerance. People think that they could just disrespect me as a Muslim woman because I'm Muslim, not because, they don't see me as Nigerian anymore. They don't see me as a person who has the basic right of freedom, the basic right of practicing what I practice or believe in what I believe, so there's intolerance of being together as a person.

I don't know if it's inferiority complex that drives this. I don't really know, but I know I did research when I was working with OTI and Mary, before I came, I did a research on intolerance, and most of the questions were basic questions that we ask people in the community, and you could see the hate. You could see the pompousness in them like why are you asking me all of these questions when I'm inferior, when I'm superior than you, especially coming from a woman again and especially from a Muslim, and I say, I ask a pastor or imam even, they don't answer.

They feel how dare you? So there's no

tolerance. There's no respect. That is so gone. I am still looking for a reason why that is gone and why it's diminished, but I don't know. Mostly I would say it's lack of education and, you know, lack of, you know, just coexistence.

It's derailed, and our culture, the difference in culture and ethnic groups is so many in Nigeria, it's given a bad vibe to tolerance, to religious tolerance in, you know, our regions. That's what I think at least a little.

VICE CHAIR PERKINS: Thank you.

Chair Bhargava, that's all I have on this one, and I would yield over to the other commissioners to be able to ask some questions.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Let me turn to the other commissioners. If you want to unmute yourself and ask a question, please do.

COMMISSIONER CARR: Thank you, Chairman Bhargava.

I have a question. First of all, thank you to our panelists. Your testimony was

incredible. Mr. Wolf, I did read that article, "The Giant in Africa is Failing." I too am troubled by genocide, as you mentioned genocide by several groups.

And Hafsat, what you said, what's happened to you and what you've seen breaks my heart, and I am heartbroken by hearing your testimony and what you've experienced.

There's an emerging interest in Nigeria, and this was an emergency hearing today, recommended by all, all of our commissioners unanimously that we have this hearing. And I believe that's why we almost have 150 guests today. The world is concerned about what's happening there.

I for one believe that Nigeria is better than this, and they need to get their act together. Here's my question. How can we leverage our influence in this country to make sure that the government takes security more seriously, arrests and prosecutes the perpetrators of violence, and

ensure that religious freedom is protected?

And I would address that to any of you.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Father, I believe you're muted if you're trying to share, which I think you are.

MR. WOLF: One of the advantages when President Bush and Colin Powell appointed John Danforth, John Danforth then had the credibility that when he went to Sudan, he met with the leaders of Sudan, and he was able to speak, and when he spoke, he was basically speaking for the White House. He was basically speaking for Colin Powell. It takes a strong person, who is not partisan, not political, to be able to go.

Secondly, John Danforth was able to engage the British. He was able to engage surrounding European countries. He was able to engage the U.N. So you need one person who has it. You almost, you remember during years ago in Colombia, they had a Plan Colombia that looked at every aspect with regard to Colombia.

You need a Plan Nigeria Lake Chad Region, and again, it isn't just Nigeria. The people in Chad are impacted. The people in Burkina Faso, Mali, of the surrounding one. So some person who can come in and speaks for the administration and when he meets with the president of Nigeria and the surrounding presidents, when he meets with the ambassadors, and all the surrounding ambassadors, he speaks for the president of the United States and the Secretary of State and has the ability to mobilize our government, as well as the World Food Program, to get the World Food Program to put things in.

So I think that's what you really, really need. There's a lot of problems, and I think Danforth laid out a course. And if you look at the State Department list, there are many Special Envoys. I believe, and I may very well be wrong, and I hope I am, I believe that Nigeria will implode, and what frightens me to think that if this were happening in Scandinavia, if this were

happening in Eastern Europe, do you think the world would be silent?

The world would be engaged, and right now the world is not engaged, and we in the United States, we are not engaged.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you, Congressman Wolf.

Father Bature, let me turn to you, and then Hafsat, I'll turn to you after that.

REV. BATURE: Okay. Yes. I just want to say something with regards to the question and how we have been living, as Hafsat had mentioned.

Yeah, over time, you see Muslims and Christians living together, you know, fellowship together, in terms of their religious festivities, both Christmas and Id el Kabir or Eid Mubarak, but now we have seen religious intolerance.

This is responsible for the political instability in Nigeria, and this is because the political leaders have seen religion as a tool to manipulate the vulnerable masses of the society.

In the light of that, there is need to revive national consciousness, as the Congressman just mentioned earlier.

Nigeria is much better than this.

Jobbins, you will agree with me when we met in New York a couple of years back, prior to the COVID-19. We did talk about issues like this, and the recent past ambassador to the United States, Symington, whom I know very well, with John Campbell that I met in Washington and Virginia a couple of years back. We did talk specifically about this.

And Ambassador Symington visited me here in my own university, Federal University, Wukari, and we talked about the farmers-herders issues, and we talked about religious tolerance among our people, but we've observed that time, just in the limited time, right now as I speak to you, there is a serious crisis between farmers and herders, and the undertone there is religion.

The intolerance is getting so entrenched and deep into us that even the younger ones, the

little children know that there is a problem, and this problem is emanating from religion.

Like I discussed with the former Ambassador Symington, I told him that we have been taking risks. Going to those places, we are the grassroot people; we see the people suffering. They've come up to us. They tell us this is a problem, and we've gone to the government, and the government is not doing anything about it.

We can talk about the better years that we have in the times past, but as a Catholic priest, I don't have the constituency apart from the Catholic Church. What helps me to go to the Muslims, the Christians, and the tradionalists? Right now I'm even working on issues that pertains to Christians and to Muslims and the traditional worshippers about places of worship, which have been desecrated, based on this intolerance issue.

And I think that like I did mention that this is not an academic issue; this is a practical issue that involves the lives of people. And as a

Catholic priest, I stand on the principle of justice and peace of the Catholic Church that taught me and my other colleagues on how to reach out to others. The intolerance in Nigeria is so deep, and the politics of religion is so deep, that the political leaders are now playing on the ignorance of the people to kill them.

And I believe that this panel will not just go like that. We've been doing a little bit of a risky job of going up and down with the kidnapping issues. Priests have been kidnapped and killed, as you must have seen in the media, and issues that involve marriage, that I didn't mention, which has no recourse to parents or no parental consent, has created so much division, especially in my own community.

And then the places of worship, too, where you said this place is for Christians, or the Christians are building their churches, and overnight it is destroyed, or the Muslims are building their mosques, and it's just overnight

they said, no, this is not dependent on which part of the country you are.

So these are issues that we truly need to look into, and the whole bulk of the blame, and I want to be very emphatic here, is based on the political leaders, and the constitution did not help matters either because the constitution of Nigeria, if you really look at it, it favors one religion over the other, and that is why people are now craving and people are now understanding stuff that they want to be represented.

Other than that it's still going to be the same case, and I hope that this panel will practically do something about it, and we're truly doing something about it.

Thank you.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you, Father.

I know that Hafsat, both Hafsat and Mike wanted to get in. So let me turn to Hafsat, and I'll turn to you, Mike.

MS. MUHAMMED: Okay. So I'm just going to

add to what Father Bature said about the constitution.

For so long, concerned and patriotic Nigerians have, you know, for a very long time demanded constitutional review and amendment based on the conviction that not only a huge part of the constitutional provisions is unrealistic, obsolete, and not workable.

You know, in this age and time and millennia, we have problems rather than solutions. The constitution has a lot of problems here and there. And like Father Bature said, people are coming to understand this. But this is what I believe. See, what I believe is that the politicians in Nigeria are allowing this constitution to be the way it is and not really looking into it or listening to people that are saying amend the constitution, review it, change some stuff, do this, just because they want to keep it that way to keep chaos in Nigeria.

I believe, I believe, and this is my

opinion, that there are actors, state actors, federal actors, that are driving these conflicts in Nigeria and are, you know, making it, allowing it to escalate just because they want to keep it that way and come out at the end of the day, after millions or thousands of people are dead or misplaced, and come out and act as the good guy.

This is what I believe, and I believe at the end of the day, Nigeria has to separate religion and state, whether they like it or not, when it comes to the constitution. If not, it's not going to stop. It's a time bomb. You know, the first bomb has exploded; the second bomb is exploding. The Boko Haram crisis is the first bomb. The herders and farmers crisis is the second bomb. And the third bomb is likely on its way if nothing is done.

And, you know, our system is not changed. They really need to look into it. And like Mr., Commissioner Wolf, like he said, there needs to be a bipartisan delegate that will go to Nigeria, sit

down and talk with the government, not only the president. I believe the president will listen but really cannot act because he has state actors and other people with him who would tell him what to do after they have long been gone. This, it's something that needs to be planned strategically, and people have to come to a table and think outside the box.

This is what I believe, and I will save my other comments for later. I have some things jotted down.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you so much.

Mike, let me turn to you.

MR. JOBBINS: Thanks. Thanks for those excellent interventions.

And to drill down maybe on Commissioner Carr's question, which I also understood was focused especially on the security and the U.S. sort of security cooperation, I'd point to three sort of things that I think the U.S. could be doing differently or more of.

The first is we know that 77 percent of Nigerians say that the last time they asked for something from the police, they were asked to pay a bribe. And without progress in our, in the bilateral relationship on corruption and public perception, because perception is reality to some extent, of the military's accountability and effectiveness and in the security apparatus, it's very difficult to see how the security forces can deliver change.

And those are just really tough public opinion numbers in terms of public confidence, and it makes it a lot harder for them to do their job, and I'll suggest also looking at structures like the National Human Rights Commission in Nigeria, which does have a mandate to investigate and hold accountable public officials for abuses of human rights and abuses of power and other kinds of anti-corruption and human rights abuse mechanisms.

The second is that the nature of the crisis is such that you have such a massive

deployment of the Nigerian military across the country that there's very little capacity. So, for example, the situation in the northeast with ISWAP, as it deteriorates, there is challenges in moving to other parts of the country to deploy against that challenge when they're tied down in security operations elsewhere.

And that points to a real fundamental question in the U.S. security assistance, of who does what and who are we supporting to do what? Right now you have soldiers who instead of warfighting are being tied into community mediation processes or investigating livestock that have been rustled or reports of young people being trained and armed in different parts of the country, which is not necessarily the warfighting mission that a military unit force has been trained to do.

But to the extent that no one else is being trained and equipped, the civilian agencies aren't being supported at the local government areas, the LGAs, that efforts like the Plateau

Peace Building Agency in Plateau State or in Adamawa, that civil societies have the access to track down and do an early warning, early response type system before events happen, then the military is naturally called to step into that role, which isn't theirs. They don't necessarily always do it well. They don't have the capacity to do it, and it raises and redoubles the issues of corruption.

So I would encourage actually, there's some role of security assistance. Actually a lot of security that's not the role of the security forces. And so the effect, to the extent that we're supporting conflict mediation, dispute resolution, civilian-led peace-building efforts, that takes things off the plate of the security forces.

And then, finally, the third is, as we heard from Congressman Wolf in his focus on sort of the degree to which the World Food Program, as he cited, and the sort of the food insecurity more generally in driving this, as Father Bature and

Hafsat both alluded to the political dimensions, we know that actually a lot of the drivers of the security crisis are going to be the elections.

And so how is U.S. electoral assistance and the election strategy being brought to bear so it doesn't create more problems? And, in fact, moves towards some of these positive, you know, solutions to some of the long-running problems.

How are we bringing our food assistance or agricultural development or our trade policy to bear? So I think then that comes back to this question of sort of the whole, the U.S. whole-of-government response.

And so I would focus on those three. Sort of corruption within the security apparatus and how we're addressing corruption, perceived corruption? Two, sort of security realm that is sort of the right actors attacking the right problems. And third, sort of bringing the whole of U.S. government to improve rather than looking for just a magic bullet within the security realm itself.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you to each of you for those responses.

Let me now turn to Commissioner Davie, and then I think we have a few other commissioners who have questions if we have time, but let me turn to Commissioner Davie first, and then we'll get to some of the other commissioners as well.

COMMISSIONER DAVIE: Sure. Thank you, Chair Bhargava.

And, again, I want to thank all of the panelists for their contributions. I'm really interested in sort of where the strengths are in terms of institutions in Nigeria that, you know, if we had this Special Envoy, as Congressman Wolf has advocated, if we had sort of other interventions as have been discussed, what would be the strongest sort of both religious and institutions of civil society that a Special Envoy or other partners might engage to advance some of the interests obviously that we're all, that we've all discussed here today from religious freedom to ending

corruption to greater security to dealing with the conflicts between herders and farmers?

I know Father Bature, you mentioned the Roman Catholic Church and your ability to appeal to them. But what are those other institutions that are strong in Nigeria that could be, that could be leveraged, that could be coordinated and partnered with to address some of these pressing questions?

MS. MUHAMMED: So one institution that I can rightly--or a group of people I would like to say is the philanthropists. The philanthropists in Nigeria are not well engaged when it comes to these kind of things, and I believe they are a go-to when it comes to these kind of situations. The philanthropists because there is so much poverty, there is so much uneducated people, and, you know, it's sad to say that the philanthropists are those who feed them in a good way and, you know, they are those who they go to because a lot of them don't even trust their leaders, their senators, their representatives.

They don't trust them because they believe they are corrupt, but they do go to the philanthropists. They do go to the religious leaders like Father Bature, and they do go to some imam, but these days especially in the northern part of Nigeria, we've had issues where a lot of imams are preaching otherwise, and this is an issue that, you know, the U.S. needs to look into as well. When it comes to the preachings, what are they saying?

They need to be tracked. There need to be laws and licensings of who can preach and who cannot. There was a certain kind of law that was supposed to be placed, but I don't know what happened to that, but this is one of the issues. We need to find stakeholders who live in the community, not in Abuja, not, you know, here in U.S. while they are senators or other countries. We need to find people who are in the community.

And then we need to also look at the traditional leaders. We need to engage them. The

U.S. government can use these people as friends and work with them and ensure that, you know, the people's voices are heard, you know. They go to the communities. They go down to the grassroots.

They talk to these people. The president doesn't. You know, the senators, once they get elected, that's it. They do not go back to their constituencies. So we need to engage these kind of people, you know, the philanthropists, some religious leaders, and some traditional leaders, and, you know, just the layman that even, you know, sells orange in the market but has a lot of people who listen to him like the godfather. We need to look for these kind of people, and it's a tricky, tricky thing to do.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Any others want to talk about institutions? Father Bature, let me turn to you.

REV. BATURE: Yeah. I fully concur with what Hafsat has said because we are grassroots people, and the whole situation bounces back to us.

I run an NGO. Each time there is a problem, there's a crisis. The people ask where is the government? Where are our representatives? Or they send us to take the message back to them.

And they are the--sometimes we play the policymakers. Whether they listen to what we present is another thing. They're only active during elections, and of course during elections, they come out, they give money to, you know, people are hungry, people are ignorant, people wants to move their lives. And you don't see the presence of government.

This is what I kept priming. In the lives of the people, the political leaders have completely divided. They've stayed on their own. They don't come. Just like Hafsat has mentioned, they don't come to their constituency. I am right here, and I have been going around meeting with the poor people.

The traditional rulers are often not listened to. But they are the ones that

practically deal with the people at the grassroots, too. So when we have the envoy, just like Commissioner Fred Davie did mention, there is needs to meet with those people at the grassroots. And once they do that, they will be able to really get the core of the message and how people, I mean people don't believe in the government anymore because they have been displaced.

Nobody goes there, and then the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church all over, you know, the country, they are the ones that are first on the ground to help the people with materials that will help them in their own little world, both Christians and Muslims.

I live in an institution, I teach in an institution, and I'm a chaplain of an institution. When there is crisis here in my community between Christians and Muslims, they all run to the same place. And we are the ones who are there.

So I believe that the envoy when they visited, they, of course, followed through the

right channels, but the real people to meet is exactly as what Hafsat has said.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you, Father.

MS. MUHAMMED: And, again, just to add--
I'm sorry--just to add--

CHAIR BHARGAVA: No, please.

MS. MUHAMMED: --to what Father said, when I talk about the religious leaders, the Muslim religious leaders, I would want us to note the local imams of those small masjids in the community, not the famous imams that are on TV and whatsoever, the local imams, those are a key to go. I promise you.

They are a key to go. The U.S. government should really look at these people and just people like Father, these are the people to go, and another institution is the schools. The universities, the schools, they need to be tapped into when it comes to eradicating these kind of situations.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you, Hafsat.

Let me turn to Commissioner Turkel for the next question.

COMMISSIONER TURKEL: Thank you very much, Chair Bhargava.

I wanted to begin by thanking our witnesses for their testimony, sharing their expertise on these important issues.

Nigeria is a surprisingly democratic society with a government more interested in achieving local legitimacy than looking positive in the international spotlight. This focus makes it particularly challenging and difficult for the United States to influence the Nigerian government directly.

I have two questions for everyone in the panel. How can the United States better partner with local civil society organizing organizations fighting for peace and religious freedom in Nigeria?

And also is there any role for the United States to help with the bottom-up approach?

MR. JOBBINS: I could take some examples from the U.S. perspective. I think there, I'm a big believer that you can't, you can't start with what you don't have. And so I would look at some of the things that the U.S. has begun to support that are yielding results.

So USAID has a people-to-people reconciliation program as it's called. It's aimed at building bridges and preventing violence in a couple of communities across the Middle Belt that seems to be relatively promising. They're making some investments.

So look at some of the programs that already aim to do that and see where--there's an immense resources gap, and so what is the potential to scale from things that are already working.

The second, on engagement in grassroots, as I listened to Hafsat and Father Bature, there's often a mistake by foreign diplomats, Americans and others, or foreign analysts in a situation like that in Nigeria of confusing leadership and power

based on authority rather than power based on influence.

And if we enter and look at the grassroots situation and say, you know, it's colonel so-and-so, general so-and-so, someone in a formal position in Abuja, may be in a position of authority, but they're not necessarily in a position of influence.

That's particularly true, for example, of women, many of whom are not in positions of formal, of formal authority, yet have an enormous amount of influence.

So if you look at who's powerful, and you only look at those sitting in formal authorities, you ignore the grassroots, you ignore women, you ignore young people, you ignore the most credible religious actors who are often those in daily contact, like Father Bature was saying, with the people in favor of the formalized, but often quite distant, hierarchies.

So I would make those two suggestions as an approach: to invest in things that are already

working and see where we can take them to scale, where there are models like the Plateau State peace-building agency, convening security architectures that they're rolling out to engage to grassroots, and how we can sort of support those kind of efforts to take scale rather than cutting something new from whole cloth and imported from the outside.

And then, second, really reshift the lens of our diplomacy, the lens of our analysis, away from an obsession with formal authority, to understand, as the best of Nigeria's politicians do, that there's a different set of actors who are highly influential, particularly when you're dealing with stressed out, highly suffering people, and focus on investing and engaging them, many of whom are not the usual suspects.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Does anyone else want to respond to these questions?

I know that actually Hafsat and Father Bature started to go into this conversation even

before the question in response to the last one. So if you want to add anything, and certainly invite Tomas and Congressman Wolf to join us as well, in any responses to this particular set of questions on how the U.S. government can really engage on the ground with those who are "local," to use Hafsat's term, and not "the usual suspects," to use others?

So, Hafsat, I see you unmuted. Let me turn to you and then if others want to get in, please do.

MS. MUHAMMED: Yeah. So I agree with Jobbins totally, 100 percent, like to keep working on the existing programs or whatever that's working right now, but also they are, they are a lot of-- this is another group of people that are being ignored when it comes to problem-solving. People who are based here in the United States, who are Nigerians, to be honest with you, people like me who have a vast experience with working with local actors and helping a lot of NGOs come to light in

northern part of Nigeria, and, you know, working with the government.

We are here as immigrants or refugees, but yet we are so, absolutely, we are so idle when it comes to these things that we know, and there is information that we can also give and say, okay, well, if you come up with this or if you're doing this, that, that, that, that, that. We're not engaged properly when it comes to problem-solving.

So I would say to chair Turkel to engage local Nigerians who are here in the United States. There are a lot of, there's a lot of us who know what we can add to way before, you know, a team is sent to Nigeria to work with people like Father, Father Bature, so on and so forth.

So also look at people who are here who know what's going on back there or have had firsthand experience with, you know, what has transpired back in Nigeria, to work on what's already existing like Mr. Jobbins said.

MR. HUSTED: If I could jump in briefly as

well, the issue of U.S. influence and leverage has now come up a number of times. Both Commissioner Turkel and also Commissioner Carr raised sort of how the United States might seek to bear influence on these issues.

Congressman Wolf brought up, you know, one possible option for the United States, which would be the appointment of a Special Envoy to cover sort of this, the challenges in Nigeria within sort of a regional context.

You know, I would also note that on the role of perhaps Congress and how members might look at this, broadly speaking, of course, members of Congress I think can pursue various options, depending on their assessment of the factors underpinning these threats to religious freedom, as well as their determination of kind of the appropriate role for the U.S. government here.

The issue of U.S. assistance has come up. Several of the panelists raised, you know, possible options for U.S. development assistance, U.S.

security assistance, to Nigeria. I would also flag the issue of punitive actions, particularly targeting the government. This is one option that some members of Congress have called for as a way to perhaps create leverage for, exert U.S. leverage over the Nigerian government.

I would remind the Commission, as well as the viewers, that the punitive actions that are called for pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act were waived for Nigeria, following Nigeria's CPC designation in late 2020. So some members and other policymakers may sort of call for those punitive actions to be brought to bear on the Nigerian government if they perceive that those punitive actions would be helpful in encouraging certain actions.

And then sort of more broadly, you know, there are other punitive measures or other sort of diplomatic actions that can be taken pursuant to a range of authorities that the U.S. government, that Congress has provided to the U.S. government within

the realm of foreign policy.

So I'll pause there.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Thank you so much, Tomas.

All right. We have a minute left. I'm going to actually turn to Commissioner Maenza for the final question, and then we can close it out.

COMMISSIONER MAENZA: First of all, I want to say thank you again to the panelists for your excellent presentations, and I've been enjoying the conversation with you among yourselves just talking through such a complicated situation, and it really shows a multifaceted approach really is the only way we're going to move forward.

But I was curious if there were any bright spots? Are there places where you've seen certain programs, whether a U.S. program or just, you know, and I know you talk about working with the traditional leaders as being important, but I was just curious if there was something that was working that we could grow on as we go to look at recommendations for things the U.S. government

could do to move Nigeria toward religious freedom?

MS. MUHAMMED: Yes. Back in Nigeria, before I came, I know there were so many nice programs that we had organized with the Interfaith Mediation Center and when I was working for Creative Associates. And these programs are simple. We just took youths that are likely to be influenced by extremists and we just gave them something to do, something as simple as selling fruits, something as simple as, you know, volunteering to clean the hospitals.

So just we gave them things to do to make them feel responsible to their communities and to the people they live with, you know. These are simple things that we just made, we just fine-tuned it, you know, in such a way that they were appreciated more, and they would feel like they are seen.

And then we also, I know there's a program that we also did in schools, sports. We had a lot of sporting programs that we had the local leaders

and like the counselors, the chairmen, and sometimes the senators even, you know, would come, and it would make the people, it made the community seem, it made them feel loved and, you know, these are things. They are little things that would work, you know, from grassroots up.

Policing. Community policing. I know there was one time as well that we were working on community policing and engaging the community with the police where they had dialogues. This also worked at that time. At that particular community, it was peaceful, you know, and people were working without fear because the police and the community were working together.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Congressman Wolf, please go ahead.

MR. WOLF: Thank you. Thank you for the hearing.

If you read Ambassador Campbell's speech, you know how bad it is. I will end with this. There are many good people in Nigeria. They're

looking for the United States to do something. The reason the Commission was set up back in 1998 was to be a truth-teller.

There was strong opposition to the Commission because the State Department didn't want it, even anyone outside. The Commission is to be a truth-teller, to be, and so you all have the opportunity to do something, some of these people like Esther in the Bible, for such a time like this. You all can do something, and if you embrace these issues and push and push, you can help solve the problem and save the people of Nigeria.

Thank you.

CHAIR BHARGAVA: Well, as always, Congressman Wolf, you have left us at a great place to end this hearing, which is that to speak truth, to act, and to do what we can, and I want to thank each one of you for joining us today, both in the audience and as our expert witnesses.

It has been an honor to be able to hear from you, and we will take all of what we've

learned through this hearing and move forward in how we're doing our work to protect religious freedom around the world.

Thank you so much for being here.

[Whereupon, at 12:03 p.m. ET, the hearing was adjourned.]