



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

August 2021

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN NIGERIA

Nadine Maenza
Chair

Nury Turkel
Vice Chair

Commissioners

Anurima Bhargava

James W. Carr

Frederick A. Davie

Tony Perkins

Erin D. Singshinsuk
Executive Director

USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Religious Freedom in Nigeria: Extremism and Government Inaction

On June 9, 2021, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a virtual hearing on [*Religious Freedom in Nigeria: Extremism and Government Inaction*](#). This hearing examined the escalation of violence by nonstate actors in Nigeria and its potential to exacerbate deteriorating religious freedom conditions.



Then-Chair [*Anurima Bhargava*](#) led the hearing, convening [*five witnesses*](#) from a variety of perspectives. In her opening remarks, she stated that despite the existence of religious diversity within Nigeria and the constitution protecting freedom of religion for all citizens, Nigerians face opposition in exercising this right.



Then-Vice Chair [*Tony Perkins*](#) discussed the religious freedom challenges in Nigeria. Non-state actors, such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), attack religious leaders and houses of worship with impunity and abduct and execute individuals based on their religious identity. In many parts of the country, religious identity intersects with ethnicity and politics to fuel retaliatory cycles of identity-based violence. 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.



The Honorable [*Frank Wolf*](#), former Representative of Virginia's 10th Congressional District, highlighted the instability within Nigeria. Mr. Wolf stated that there is rampant hunger, little to no education in many parts of the country, sex trafficking, government corruption, and human rights abuses committed by the military, Boko Haram, and Fulani militants. He recommended the U.S. government:

- Employ an independent consultant to travel to Nigeria and provide a report on the humanitarian crisis for the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development.
- Create the role of Special Envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad region to coordinate the U.S. response to the crisis with various federal agencies.



Mike Jobbins, Vice President of Global Affairs and Partnerships at Search for Common Ground, examined the dynamics of religious violence in Nigeria. In the northeast region, much of the population lives under the control of ISWAP, where residents are

subject to religiously discriminatory tactics, such as “stop and search” activities. When public buses and taxis are searched, Christian occupants are often identified by their national identity cards and taken away, abducted, or killed. The phenomenon of rural violence in the Middle Belt, both intercommunal and natural resource-based conflict, has grown significantly in recent years. Security forces are overstretched with the military deployed in more than two-thirds of Nigeria’s states.

Mr. Jobbins made the following recommendations:

- External actors must right-size the role of religion in the violence discussed. Overstating the role of religion bolsters the agendas of those who are using it for their own purposes.
- Congress and the administration should budget appropriately. Foreign assistance to Nigeria must include a Peace, Prevention, and Security Fund to support long-term stabilization.
- The United States should develop a whole-of-government response to meet the challenges of economic insecurity, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation to ensure rural security and investment, respectively.
- The U.S. government should focus on the role of cultural heritage and conservation. The Ambassador’s Self-Help Fund, the Smithsonian, and other kinds of institutions can help rebuild and restore holy sites.
- Given that perpetrators of violence are at times not from Nigeria, there is a need to integrate Francophone Sahel and Anglophone Nigeria policymaking.



Hafsat Main Muhammad, Founder of Choice for Peace, Gender, and Development, witnessed Boko Haram’s brutality in Borno State, Nigeria, where she is from. As an educated and outspoken Muslim woman, she was targeted by Boko

Haram fighters who raped, beat, and incarcerated her. Both Christians and Muslims, especially women, are persecuted and degraded. Many women and girls, including widows and orphans, remain in the northeastern region of Nigeria controlled by Boko Haram because they have nowhere to go. The Nigerian government lacks religious tolerance and the ability to mediate the conflict. She concluded her testimony by recommending that the U.S. government should focus on education, grassroots outreach, accountability, and transparency within the Nigerian government.



Father Anthony Bature, Head of the Religious Studies Department at Federal University, Wukari, Turaba State, Nigeria, discussed religious freedom issues that are often not highlighted in the media:

- Nigeria’s membership of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is against secularity as enshrined within its constitution, which gives preferences to Islam over Christianity.
- In the north, Shari’a law is applied to citizens and foreign nationals who are not Muslim.
- Religious affairs influence government decisions leading to poor domestic and international policies.
- In parts of northern Nigeria, Christians are not allowed to build churches or places of worship.
- The Nigerian government fails to respond to the violence perpetrated by Boko Haram. Father Alphonsus Bello of Sokoto Diocese was murdered during an attack on his parish in May of this year, and nothing has been done to apprehend the killers or prosecute the crime.



Tomás F. Husted, Analyst in African Affairs at the Congressional Research Service, addressed the non-state threats to religious freedom, and considerations for U.S. policymakers.

- In the northeast, non-state actors, such as Boko Haram and ISWAP, attack Muslim and Christian individuals, ceremonies, and houses of worship. Disputes in the Middle Belt between the predominantly Christian farmers and the mainly Muslim pastoralists can assume religious dimensions and spur violence along sectarian lines.
- Recent State Department reports on religious freedom in Nigeria have highlighted state repression of the minority Shi'a community.
- Security responses from the military and law enforcement have proven insufficient and short-lived as a result of decades of corruption that has hollowed out Nigeria's security infrastructure.
- Aid restriction and targeted sanctions on Nigerian officials would publicly reinforce U.S. concern for religious freedom. Policymakers would have to balance the need for cooperation and diplomatic access in counterterrorism efforts.
- Increased U.S. security assistance could help Nigerian authorities restore security so long as it comes with human rights requirements to prevent abuses.

Then-Chair Bhargava concluded the hearing by thanking the witnesses for their decades of work promoting religious freedom and their engagement in Nigeria.

USCIRF's *2021 Annual Report* includes several recommendations to the U.S. government:

- Redesignate Nigeria as a country of particular concern for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, and redesignate Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) as an entity of particular concern;
- Develop and implement an interagency action plan on promoting religious freedom in Nigeria, in accordance with Executive Order 13926;
- Increase programming to promote access to justice and combat impunity for criminal violence in Nigeria, especially violence targeting religious communities and symbols;
- Develop localized strategies and engage diplomatically with key local government authorities in regions where state-sanctioned or tolerated violations are frequent to bring state practices in line with the constitution and international obligations; and
- Strengthen the public affairs capacity at the U.S. Embassy in Abuja to respond publicly to developments in religious freedom conditions in Nigeria, including commenting on court cases against religious prisoners of conscience, as well as to amplify domestic voices advocating for stronger religious freedom norms.



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The Commissioners listed below were present at the hearing.



Chair
Nadine Maenza



Vice Chair
Nury Turkel



Commissioner
Anurima Bhargava



Commissioner
James W. Carr



Commissioner
Frederick A. Davie



Commissioner
Tony Perkins

Professional Staff

Danielle Ashbahian
Senior Communications Specialist

Keely Bakken
Senior Policy Analyst

Dwight Bashir
Director of Outreach and Policy

Elizabeth K. Cassidy
Director of Research and Policy

Mingzhi Chen
Policy Analyst

Patrick Greenwalt
Policy Analyst

Gabrielle Hasenstab
Communications Specialist

Roy Haskins
Director of Finance and Operations

Thomas Kraemer
Director of Human Resources

Kirsten Lavery
Supervisory Policy Analyst

John Lechner
Policy Analyst

Niala Mohammad
Senior Policy Analyst

Jason Morton
Senior Policy Analyst

Mohyeldin Omer
Policy Analyst

Jamie Staley
Senior Congressional Relations Specialist

Zack Udin
Researcher

Nina Ullom
Congressional Relations and Outreach Specialist

Madeline Vellturro
Policy Analyst

Scott Weiner
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Kurt Werthmuller
Supervisory Policy Analyst

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.