

# NIGERIA

Nigeria saw a dramatic rise in sectarian or religiously-related violence in 2011 and early 2012 with three days of rioting in northern states following the April presidential elections and increased attacks by Boko Haram on Christians and Muslims, including clerics who spoke out against the group. Based on this deterioration and the Nigerian government's continued unwillingness to address severe, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2012 that Nigeria be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF has recommended CPC status for Nigeria since 2009. Before that time, Nigeria was on USCIRF's Watch List since 2002.

## Background

Since 1999, religiously-related and inter-communal violence in Nigeria has resulted in more than 14,000 people killed and thousands displaced, with numerous churches, mosques, businesses, vehicles, private homes, and other structures burned and destroyed. Years of inaction by Nigeria's federal and state governments have created a climate of impunity. Religion and religious identity are intertwined in ethnic, political, economic, and social controversies, and are misused by politicians, religious leaders, or others to rouse their constituencies for political gain. While several issues, including those pertaining to governance, "indigeneship," poverty, and ethnicity, factor into the violence in the north and Plateau State, religion is a significant catalyst to the egregious violations of religious freedom. Over time, these conflicts have taken on an increasingly sectarian character, leading to dire consequences. Further straining Christian-Muslim relations is the increased violent actions of Boko Haram in 2011 and its attacks and threats against the Christian community and Muslims with whom it disagrees.

## Religious Freedom Conditions

Nigeria faces a myriad of religious freedom concerns, including Muslim-Christian violence in the Middle Belt states, attacks and threats by the militant Boko Haram, and the implementation of Shari'ah into the criminal codes of several northern Nigerian states, where Christians experience discrimination.

**Religiously-related communal violence:** Immediately following the April 2011 presidential elections, protests by supporters of the main opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, a northern Muslim who lost the presidential election, quickly turned violent against Christians who were thought to have been sympathetic to incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian. More than 800 people, the majority of whom were Muslim, were killed (although some estimates push the death toll considerably higher) and more than 65,000 displaced in three days of rioting throughout the northern states. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) reported that at least 187 Christians were killed, 243 people injured, and more than 430 churches burned or destroyed. Human Rights Watch reported that more than 500 were killed in Kaduna State alone, of whom the vast majority was Muslim. Religiously-related tensions and conflict remain problems in the Middle Belt region, including Jos in Plateau State, where some of the most severe incidents have occurred, but large-scale outbreaks did not occur there during the past year.

**Government Impunity:** To date, only five persons have been prosecuted for their roles in religiously-related and communal violence. There is no evidence that Nigerian authorities have prosecuted any perpetrators involved in the post-election violence. In late 2010, five persons were convicted on federal terrorism charges for their role in the March 2010 violence in Jos. The Nigerian government has done little to address sectarian and communal violence, making no serious effort to investigate or prosecute most of the perpetrators of numerous killings and other crimes. Government leaders have failed to heed the warning signs of violence, and the federal police have failed to respond effectively and appropriately, or even at all, when violence has erupted.

**Boko Haram:** Boko Haram is a militant group that espouses an extreme and violent interpretation of Islam, and some of its leaders have received training from al-Qaeda linked organizations. Although in existence since 2002, its profile increased following the August 2011 bombing of the United Nations' main office in Abuja. It has used improvised explosive devices, suicide bombers, and automatic weapons to target police stations, government buildings, schools, and churches. Persons claiming to represent Boko Haram have called for the implementation of *Shari'ah* law and for Christians to leave the north. The group exploded bombs in or around churches in Jos, Kano, Madalla, Gadaka, and Damaturu on Christmas Day, 2011, and continues in 2012 to bomb churches and kill Christians in northern and Middle Belt states. It also has killed a number of Muslim religious leaders who challenged the group's doctrine and activities and

has threatened the President of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, the Sultan of Sokoto Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar, to "purify" Islam in the country. The Nigerian government has mobilized against the threat posed by Boko Haram, and reportedly made numerous arrests over the past year of suspected Boko Haram members, including a lead suspect in the Christmas 2011 bombings.

**Shari'ah Law:** Since October 1999, 12 northern Nigerian states have established, or announced plans to establish, Shari'ah in their criminal code. This expansion of Shari'ah has led to discriminatory practices, such as banning the sale and consumption of alcohol and disadvantaging women in education, health care, and public transportation. These practices affect Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Shari'ah punishments include amputation, flogging, or death by stoning, which the UN Committee against Torture has deemed to breach the prohibition against inhuman or degrading treatment under international human rights standards. Trials in Shari'ah courts that have been established throughout the 12 northern states, often fall short of basic international legal standards, and defendants have limited rights of appeal and sometimes no opportunity to seek legal representation.

**Discrimination:** Christian leaders in the northern states protest what they view as discrimination at the hands of Muslim-controlled governments and describe their community members as having the status of second-class citizens. They allege official discrimination in the denial of applications to build or repair places of worship, access to education and state-run media, representation in government bodies, and employment in government. Muslim leaders in the southern states report official or officially-sanctioned discrimination in the media, education, and government. The State Department reported that in 2010, Shi'a Muslims' homes and businesses were destroyed with little to no response from state officials, and Shi'a were fired from jobs on account of their faith.

### **Recommendations for U.S. Policy**

To break the culture of impunity that fosters sectarian and communal violence, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government designate Nigeria as a CPC and:

- Prioritize Nigeria's recurrent sectarian violence and failure to prosecute perpetrators in the U.S.-Nigeria Bi-National Commission's working groups on good governance and security;
- Urge the Nigerian government to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of all sectarian and communal violence vigorously and eliminate "indigene" status either through constitutional reform or judicial review;
- Work with the government to ensure that Shari'ah codes, as applied, uphold the principle of gender and religious equality under the law and are not applied to non-Muslims or to individual Muslims who do not wish to go before Shari'ah courts; and dissolve the *Hisbah*, or religious police; and
- Expand the U.S. presence and outreach efforts, primarily in northern Nigeria, by opening a consulate or other official presence in Kano or elsewhere in the north.

**Please see USCIRF's 2012 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Nigeria.**