

NIGERIA

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: 2013 Annual Report

Bottom Line: Religious freedom declined, primarily due to attacks by Boko Haram and despite government attempts to protect churches. The government continued to fail to prosecute perpetrators of religiously-related violence that has killed more than 14,000 Nigerians, both Christian and Muslim.

Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria declined in 2012 due to Boko Haram attacks on churches, Christians, establishments deemed “un-Islamic” and Muslim critics. The government also continues to be unwilling to address severe, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations and fails to bring those responsible for sectarian violence to justice, and prevent or contain acts of such violence or reprisal attacks. As a result, since 1999 more than 14,000 Nigerians have been killed in sectarian violence between Muslims and Christians. USCIRF again recommends in 2013 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 then, 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 or 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 violence in the north and Middle Belt, 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. Boko Haram, a militant group that espouses an extreme and violent interpretation of Islam, benefits from this culture of impunity and lawlessness as it exploits Muslim-Christian tensions to destabilize Nigeria. Boko Haram also justifies its attacks on churches by citing, among other issues, state and federal government actions against Muslims.

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 incorporation of Shari’ah into the criminal codes of several northern Nigerian states where Christians experience discrimination.

Religiously-related Communal Violence: Sectarian violence continued in 2012, although not at the levels of previous reporting periods. Reprisal attacks between Muslim Hausa and Fulani and other ethnic Christian communities, sometimes resulting in loss of life, continue to occur in two Middle Belt states, Plateau and Kaduna. Both states have experienced large-scale violent outbreaks in past years. The most serious recent incident occurred on July 7, 2012 when armed Muslim Fulani killed at least 25 Christians in three villages in Jos South. Nineteen of the gunmen were killed in an exchange with the military Special Task Force. Mourners then were attacked the following day during a burial service, with at least 20 killed, including Federal Senator for Plateau State North Gyang Dalyop Datong and Majority Leader in the Plateau State House Assembly, Gyang James Fulani. Other reported incidents of sectarian violence in 2012 include: on January 10, in Potiskum, eight people were killed when gunmen opened fire in a bar in reprisal for an assault on a mosque and Islamic school in Benin in which five were killed and six injured; on November 18, Christians who set up an illegal checkpoint on a road near their church during services to prevent attacks, killed a Muslim who tried to go through the checkpoint – sparking Muslim retaliations and riots; and on November 22 in Bichi town, a Christian allegedly blasphemed the Prophet Muhammad, leading to hundreds of Muslim youths rioting.

Government Impunity: Federal-state jurisdictional disputes and a lack of political will continue to pose a challenge to address the violence, its underlying causes and lack of prosecutions. Almost universally, individuals identified as perpetrators have not been prosecuted, and there were no known prosecutions for sectarian violence in 2012. In more than a decade, and out of 14,000 sectarian deaths, USCIRF has confirmed that fewer than 200 individuals have been prosecuted for their involvement in sectarian violence, despite the fact that video and photographic evidence of sectarian conflicts identifying perpetrators are found on the internet. Since there are no consequences for violence, large-scale incidents regularly trigger ricochet riots and retaliation. In response to religion-related violence, federal and state officials have formed more than a dozen commissions of inquiry to review the causes of the violence and make recommendations to prevent further violence. However, commission recommendations rarely are implemented, and these commissions often fault the government for failing to implement the recommendations previous commissions issued.

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 Christians to leave the north. In this reporting period, Boko Haram attacked more than 25 churches and church services, killing and injuring hundreds, assassinated Muslims critical of the organization, and attacked institutions and persons present at beer gardens and gambling sites. In an effort to further destabilize Nigeria, church attacks predominately are occurring in northern cities with a history of sectarian violence, including Kaduna, Bauchi and Jos. Three Kaduna city bombings in 2012 resulted in Christian reprisal attacks that killed more than 100 people.

Shari'ah Law: Since October 1999, 12 northern Nigerian states have established, or announced plans to incorporate 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; the UN Committee against Torture has deemed these punishments 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 their community members 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.

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 vigorously the perpetrators of all sectarian and communal violence and eliminate "indigene" status either through constitutional reform or judicial review;

- Encourage and support efforts by the Nigerian government to provide additional security personnel to protect northern Christian minorities and clerics and Muslim traditional rulers who denounce Boko Haram attacks, and consider creating a witness protection-like program; 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 2013 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Nigeria.