



NIGERIA

Key Findings

Nigeria's democracy is being tested by recurring sectarian violence, attacks and threats against Christians by Boko Haram, and the misuse of religion by politicians, religious leaders, and others. In a country where religion and religious identity are intertwined in ethnic, political, economic, and social controversies, these dynamics strain already tense Christian-Muslim relations. While the Nigerian government does not engage in religious persecution, it tolerates severe violations through its failure to bring to justice those responsible for systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, or to prevent or contain sectarian violence. Boko Haram benefits from this culture of impunity and lawlessness as it exploits religious tensions to destabilize Nigeria. Based on these concerns, USCIRF again recommends in 2014 that Nigeria be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC. USCIRF has recommended CPC status for Nigeria since 2009. Previously, Nigeria was on USCIRF's Watch List since 2002.

Background

Nigeria's population of 170 million people is equally divided between Muslims and Christians. It is among the world's most religious countries, and religious identity is of primary importance to most Nigerians. Religious identity frequently falls along regional, ethnic, political, and socio-economic lines and provides flashpoints for violence. The Nigerian government does not actively perpetrate religious freedom abuses, but does tolerate particularly severe violations.

While the 1999 constitution provides for freedom of religion or belief, several legal provisions negatively impact religious freedom, including the legal distinction between persons whose ethnic group is deemed by state-level officials to be native to a particular area ("indigenes") and those considered from another part of the country ("settlers"). Indigene and settler iden-

ties can fall along religious lines, leading to violent ethno-religious fights to control local governments and determine who is considered an indigene and therefore entitled to education, social service, and employment benefits. Additionally, the constitution's federalism provisions create a confused rule-of-law system that impedes successful prosecutions. The frequent result is late and poor police response to religious violence and no prosecutions of perpetrators.

Since 1999, violence between Christian and Muslim communities in Nigeria, particularly in the Middle Belt states, has resulted in more than 16,000 people killed,

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hundreds of thousands displaced, and thousands of churches, mosques, businesses, homes, and other structures damaged or destroyed. Years of inaction by Nigeria's federal and state governments have created a climate of impunity. Human Rights Watch, Jubilee Campaign, and Nigerian government officials have documented only 225 convictions for this violence, including for the March 2010 Dogo Nahawa massacre, April 2011 post-election violence, and other incidents. Since there are no consequences for violence, incidents regularly trigger ricochet riots and retaliation. Human Rights Watch estimates that since January 2010, 2,000 to 3,000 Muslims and Christians in the Middle Belt have been killed in regular revenge attacks on each other's communities. While herder-farmer fights over land also factor into this violence, religion is a significant catalyst,

increasing the sectarian character of these conflicts, leading to dire consequences.

Exacerbating Muslim-Christians tensions is Boko Haram, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization that views Nigeria's federal and northern state governments, political leaders, and religious elites as morally corrupt. It rejects the secular state, calls for the universal implementation of what it considers "pure" Shari'ah law to resolve the ills facing northern Nigerian Muslims, has called on all Christians to leave northern Nigeria, and perpetrates violent attacks against the police, military, Christians, churches, schools, and Muslim critics.

In addition, Christian leaders in the northern states protest northern state governments' discrimination against Christians in the denial of applications to build or repair places of worship, access to education and state-run media, representation in government bodies, and government employment. Since 1999, 12 Muslim-majority northern Nigerian states have established their interpretation of Shari'ah law in their criminal codes and some states have funded and supported *Hisbah*, or religious police, to enforce such interpretations.

USCIRF travelled to Abuja, Jos, Kaduna, and Kafan in March 2014 and met with Nigerian politicians, religious leaders, civil society representatives, and U.S. officials to further investigate religious freedom in Nigeria.

Religious Freedom Conditions 2013–2014 Sectarian Violence

Although there were no episodes of large-scale violence, Muslim-Christian attacks continued at elevated levels in Plateau and Kaduna states and have spread to other states in this reporting period. Hundreds of persons were killed in dozens of episodes of this violence, chiefly Christians attacked by Fulani herdsmen. No prosecutions are known and security agents were reported at times to have participated. While there was no post-election Muslim-Christian violence in Jos after the February 2014 Local Government Area elections, sectarian violence outside the city escalated in the lead-up to the elections.

Boko Haram

Despite the deployment of the Nigerian army and the declaration of a state of emergency in three northeast-

ern Nigerian states in May 2013, Boko Haram continued its attacks in the reporting period. While there were fewer bombings and other large-scale attacks on churches during the reporting period, at least 30 churches were burned or shot at, killing more than 150 Christians. Boko Haram also targeted attacks on Christian communities in the northeast, killing dozens of Christian villagers. The terrorist organization also

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was responsible for the July 30 bombing in the Christian area of Sabon Gari, Kano State that damaged two churches and killed more than 45; the January 22, 2014 attack on a Catholic parish in Adamawa State that killed 22; the May 14, 2013 murder of Christian Association of Nigeria Borno Secretary Reverend Faye Pama Musa; and the kidnapping and later release of a French priest in Cameroon. Boko Haram attacks on Muslim critics also continued this year with the January 31, 2014 assassination of Sheik Adam Albani. The terrorists also attacked multiple mosques in this reporting period, killing more than 50 Muslims.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

Nigeria is the United States' primary priority in sub-Saharan Africa, highlighted by the frequent trips there by senior U.S. government officials. In 2010, the two governments created the U.S.-Nigeria Bi-National Commission to help them "work together on issues of common concern and shared responsibility" and to "support the aspirations of the Nigerian people for a peaceful, prosperous, stable, democratic future." USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government designate Nigeria a CPC to help the Nigerian government end the culture of impunity, reduce religious tensions, and address other root causes of sectarian violence. In addition USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Enter into a binding agreement with the Nigerian government, as defined in section 405(c) of the International Religious Freedom Act, setting forth commitments the government would undertake

to address policies leading to violations of religious freedom, including but not limited to the following:

- vigorously investigating, prosecuting, and bringing to justice perpetrators of all past and future incidents of sectarian violence and terrorism;
- developing effective conflict-prevention and early-warning mechanisms at the local, state, and federal levels using practical and implementable criteria;
- developing the capability to deploy specialized police and army units rapidly to prevent and combat sectarian violence in cities around the country where there has been a history of sectarian violence; and
- taking steps to professionalize its police and military forces in its counter-terrorism, investigative, community policing, crowd control, and conflict prevention capacities by conducting specialized training for its military and security forces on human rights standards, as well as non-lethal responses to crowd control and quelling mob or communal violence;
- Prioritize in the U.S.-Nigeria Bi-National Commission issues of Nigeria’s recurrent sectarian violence and failure to prosecute perpetrators in the discussions of the working groups on good governance and security;
- Issue public statements warning against post-election violence and the misuse of religion by politicians during the campaigns for the February 2015 presidential and governorship elections, and support civil society efforts to prevent election-related violence;
- 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, and consider creating a witness protection-like program;
- Support civil society organizations at the national, regional, state, and local levels that have special expertise and a demonstrated commitment to

interreligious and interethnic reconciliation and conflict prevention; and

- Support programs and institutions, particularly in areas where sectarian violence has occurred, that monitor, report on, and counter religiously-inflammatory language and incitement to violence, consistent with the right to freedom of expression.