

September 19, 2022

Letter Calling on the State Department to Designate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern

Dear Secretary Blinken:

We, the undersigned, are a group of individuals and organizations that advocate for human rights and freedom of religion and belief around the world. We represent diverse religious, non-religious, and ethnic backgrounds but are united in our goal of promoting freedom of religion or belief for all. As you prepare to designate Countries of Particular Concern for nations who have “engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom,” we ask that you designate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) and appoint a Special Envoy to investigate the situation and make recommendations, in consultation with local representatives.

Well-known terrorist groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP target Christians and Muslims who reject extremism throughout Northeastern Nigeria. Militia groups operate on a wide scale throughout the North and Middle Belt, although increasingly in the Federal Capital Territory and the Southeast as well. While the motives of the militia groups are diverse, a significant portion of them are driven by extremist ethnoreligious factors, disproportionately targeting Christians, as attested to both by widespread eyewitness testimony and data. The Observatory of Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA) reported that from October 1, 2020, to September 30, 2021, 4,303 Christians and 2,235 Muslims were killed in jihadist-related contexts. When controlling for the differences in the Christian and Muslim populations in the different geopolitical zones and states where these killings occurred, ORFA found that Christians were 7.8 times more likely to be killed in jihadist-related attacks than Muslims. This disproportionality (with similar trends for the earlier period October 2019-September 2020) demonstrates that Christians are being specifically targeted by terrorists and militants.

After the still unexplained removal of Nigeria’s CPC designation in November 2021, both the general level of violence and specific targeting of Christians increased. Open Doors found more Christians killed in Nigeria in 2021—4,650—than in all other countries in the world combined. The International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law views the trend for 2022 as on-track to surpass that number, with no fewer than 2,543 Christians killed in jihadist-related violence in the first half of 2022. The violence has also begun spreading outside of the North in high-profile attacks on churches and pastors, along with increased kidnappings. On Pentecost Sunday 2022, terrorists attacked St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Owo, Ondo State, killing at least 40 worshippers. The Nigerian government’s ability and willingness to control militancy remains extremely questionable after ISWAP’s attack on the Kuje prison in Abuja that freed hundreds of militants, only half of whom were recaptured, and that coincided with a failed attack on President Muhammadu Buhari’s convoy in Katsina.

But the extreme levels of violence and insecurity, in which religious motivations play a significant role, are not the only violations of religious freedom in Nigeria. The impact of the criminal blasphemy laws on the books in most of the Northern states are clear violations of both the Nigerian constitution and international law. Humanist Mubarak Bala has been detained on blasphemy charges since April 2020 and was sentenced

in April 2022 to 24 years in prison. Sufi singer Yahaya Sharif-Aminu is still facing trial for allegations of blasphemy after a Court of Appeal in August 2022 found the Kano State Sharia Penal Code blasphemy law constitutional, even with the death penalty attached.

These blasphemy laws have contributed to a culture of mob violence that exploded in 2022. Deborah Emmanuel Yakubu, a Christian college student in Sokoto, was stoned and beaten to death by her classmates, and her body burnt, because she thanked Jesus for helping her pass an exam. Local police authorities did little to stop the attack once it had begun. Only two attackers have been arrested, and the charges brought against them were condemned by the Nigerian Bar Association as no more than slaps-on-the-wrist. Those charges inspired mobs to torch churches in Sokoto and demand the release of the attackers. Copycat blasphemy accusations and mobs spread in the days following Yakubu's murder.

The government has also attempted to crackdown on speech criticizing its approach to violations of religious freedom and human rights. Luka Binniyat, a Catholic journalist and human rights activist, has published multiple articles on attacks against Christians in Kaduna state and has criticized the government's response. For that, he has been charged with "cyberstalking" and jailed multiple times, most recently from November 2021-February 2022. The charges against him have still not been dropped. The ECOWAS Court has repeatedly rebuked President Buhari's attempts to silence criticism of his human rights record by shutting down Twitter and threatening to prosecute users.

The international religious freedom advocacy community is united in calling for Nigeria to be designated as a CPC. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has reiterated that it views the removal of the designation in 2021 as "appalling." Over the summer, Senators called on the State Department to designate Nigeria as a CPC. Multiple Nigerian religious and civic leaders like Catholic Bishop Jude Arogundade, who oversees the Ondo diocese where St. Francis Xavier Church was attacked, have likewise criticized the removal of Nigeria's CPC status, and have called for the creation of a Special Envoy. Former Congressman and current USCIRF Commissioner Frank Wolf, who introduced the IRF Act of 1998 and for whom the 2016 IRF Act amendments were named, has repeatedly called for the creation of a Special Envoy for Nigeria.

The CPC designation and Special Envoy are vital to recognizing the gravity of the religious freedom violations occurring in the country and the government's unwillingness to control the problems, as well as its contributions to the problems.

We thank you for your consideration.

Best regards,

Organizations

21Wilberforce
Accountability Lab Nigeria
ADF International
American Humanist Association
Anglican Persecuted Church Network
Boat People SOS - Religious Freedom Project
Christian Freedom International
Christian Solidarity International
Church of Scientology National Affairs Office
Committee for Religious Freedom in Vietnam
Decency & Clarity

Denis Hurley Peace Institute
Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission
Family Research Council
Frontline Missions International
Genocide Watch
Hudson Institute Center for Religious Freedom
In Defense of Christians
Institute on Religion and Democracy
International Christian Concern
International Committee on Nigeria
International Religious Liberty Association
Jubilee Campaign USA
Katartismos Global
Lantos Foundation for Human Rights & Justice
New Wineskins Missionary Network
Prayer Pioneers
Religious Freedom Coalition
Religious Freedom Institute
Set My People Free
Shai Fund
Vietnam Coalition Against Torture
Vietnamese Women for Human Rights

Individuals

David Alton
Lord Alton of Liverpool

The Rt. Reverend Andudu Adam Elnail
Anglican Bishop of the Nuba Mountains
Episcopal Church of Sudan
Co-leader, Global Anglican Future Conference Suffering Church Network

Samuel Brownback
Former U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom

Dr. Lisa Cameron MP
UK Member of Parliament

Caroline Cox
The Baroness Cox
Independent Member of the House of Lords and Founder President of Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART)

Robert A. Destro
Former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor
Professor of Law, Catholic University of America

Fr. Fidelis Bature Joseph

Director
Centre for Human Resources and Trauma Care
Catholic Diocese of Maiduguri, Nigeria

Hamid Gharagozloo
International Organization to Preserve Human Rights

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President
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Lauren Homer
President
Law and Liberty Trust

Philip Hunt
Lord Hunt of Kings Heath

John K. Hutcheson
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Jonathan Lord MP
UK Member of Parliament

Rachael Maskell MP
UK Member of Parliament

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Rachel Miner
Founder and CEO
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Scott Morgan
President
Red Eagle Enterprises

Dr. Nguyen Dinh Thang
Laureate of 2011 Asia Human Rights and Democracy Award
Co-Founder of Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief (SEAFORB) Network

Patrice J. Pederson
President
First Freedom Foundation

Dr. Gloria Puldu
President
LEAH Foundation

Marco Respinti
Director-in-Charge
Bitter Winter: A Magazine on Religious Liberty and Human Rights

Andrew Rosindell MP
UK Member of Parliament

Andrew Selous MP
UK Member of Parliament

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Indarjit Singh
Lord Singh of Wimbledon

Dr. Gregory Stanton
Founding President and Chairman
Genocide Watch

Patricia Streeter
Global Missions Initiative Advocate
Diocese of Western Anglicans

Katrina Lantos Swett
President
Lantos Foundation for Human Rights & Justice

Emeka Umeagbalasi
Director
International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law (Intersociety), Nigeria

Frank Wolf
Retired Member of Congress (1981-2015)

Pastor Greg Young
Host, Chosen Generation Radio Show
Pastor, Faith Harvest Church