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Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Makurdi, Benue, Nigeria
Before the
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Africa Subcommittee
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“Conflict and Persecution in Nigeria: the case for the CPC designation”

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee for giving me an opportunity to be heard at a critical time for my diocese. I am Wilfred Chikpa Anagbe, and appear here as the Catholic Bishop of the diocese of Makurdi, the capital of Benue state, in Nigeria. I am the shepherd of one of three dioceses in Benue , which has a population of 6 million people¹; 3 million of whom are souls under my care. Benue state is 98% Christian, with very few Muslims.

Nigeria, and especially my diocese and the state of Benue, have become, in recent years, one of the most dangerous and insecure places for Christians.

Christians and Muslims are nearly evenly divided among Nigeria’s large population of 238 million people. Islamist extremists are fiercely contesting the possession, control and governing law of the land, especially in the country’s northern and central regions, the latter of which is where Benue is located.

There are constant ethnic, political, and religious conflicts over land and allegiance. Constitutionally, we are a secular country, but our unity has been fragile. Political and religious actions and even public speech have been carefully managed to avoid accusations of religious bias and political tensions. Today, the **clear influence of Islamist extremists has changed the traditional social dynamics** of tribe, ethnicity, religion and social status in Nigeria, as elsewhere in Africa. [Identification as a Muslim and a Fulani ethnic have been what exactly” are the determinant factors for recognition or identity as witnessed in the last two to three decades across sub-Saharan West Africa.]

A long-term, **Islamic agenda** to homogenize the population has been implemented, over several presidencies, through a strategy to reduce and eventually **eliminate the Christian identity of half of the population**.. This strategy includes both violent and non-violent actions, such as the exclusion of Christians from positions of power, the abduction of Church members, the raping of women, the killing and expulsion of

Christians, the destruction of churches and farmlands of Christian farmers, followed by the occupation of such lands by Fulani herders. All of this takes place without government interference or reprisals.

The quest to **Islamize the land appears high on the agenda of some of the powerful and influential Muslims** in Nigeria. There is a campaign to take land to spread Islam, And there is the haemorrhaging of Christian farmers from the central region of Nigeria, and Makurdi Diocese in particular, as they are forced to abandon fertile land that used to feed the nation.

Militant **Fulani herdsmen are terrorists destroying society**. They steal and vandalize, they kill and boast about it, they kidnap and rape, and they enjoy total impunity from the elected authorities. None of them have been arrested and brought to justice. This is supported by the corrupt system in which we operate, and the abject poverty among us, which allow the criminals to easily attract more recruits and prey on more victims.

Why is this happening? **Is it really a “religious war”?** Like in the past, many jihadists are motivated less by religion than by the spoils of war, and use their religion to impose themselves. In my diocese, the spoils consist mainly of fertile, well-tended land organized around a parish. The jihadists come and **abduct and kill the priests**, leaving thousands without support and basic human services.

The Makurdi Diocese in Benue State has been the epicentre of the invasion by these herders, who are more like **“hired guns” of cattle oligarchs**, who manipulate religion to rally the herders to eliminate the Christian population, and cleanse the land in the name of Islam.

This objective is behind the relentless attacks against Benue’s villagers. When we call for help to the police and the army, they do not come. At the end of 2024, several villages were warned by the attackers of the upcoming violence and the leaders called the police for defence, ahead of time. But they did not come and the Christmas massacres, almost customary, took place killing hundreds in Plateau and Benue, with the worst massacre claiming 47.² The militants also burnt down the eight Catholic churches of St. Mary’s Parish in the diocese of Gboko, as well as the parish house, clinics, schools and other houses.

The militant Fulani herdsmen bear on defenceless villagers without consequence. They follow orders **to conquer, kill, and occupy**. They attack even those who have managed to escape into our IDPs’ camps.³

What I have recounted above is happening not only in Benue State. I believe our experience in Benue is symptomatic of what is happening elsewhere in large parts of Nigeria. The experience of the Nigerian Christians today can be summed up as that of **a Church under Islamist extermination**. It is frightening to live there! Apart from the

violent campaigns and attacks against Christian villages, there are now attempts by the Islamic Council of Nigeria and various Islamic groups to impose 'sharia law' on the Christian populations. Already, twelve states in the North of Nigeria are under this sectarian religious law and attempts to extend the same to the South of Nigeria have already begun. This month, governors in the North decided abruptly to close all schools and education institutions during the months of Ramadan, leaving millions of students without learning opportunity for 5 weeks.

We live in fear because at any point, it can be our turn to be killed. But **to remain silent is to die twice**, so I have chosen to speak. I speak on behalf of the millions who are in the camps. I speak on behalf of the millions of women and children who have no husband or father, and even their own voice is taken away by the politicians who promised to help them but have become the willing tools of the jihadists. I speak on behalf of those whose loved ones have been killed but no one has even offered a word of consolation to them. I speak on behalf of the thousands of young girls who have been abducted and raped because no one, not even the media, mentions them to any more.

Foremost, I speak on behalf of my flock, who are unable to worship freely and unable to return to their ancestral farms and homes because that land has been ruthlessly taken from them by the armed herdsmen.

A prosperous Nigeria is a prosperous African continent and a safer world for all peoples.

Today, I urge you all to use every means within your mandate to **start developing a strong and good relationship** with Nigeria, where you know that when you speak of human dignity, we are also speaking of the same God-given right you believe is "unalienable". Consider that Nigeria can be your ally, but it cannot be one **where half the population is in the process of being murderously eliminated**. Work with us, the churches, and other Nigerians of good will. We are working for a peaceful and prosperous society. And our desperate plight has been set aside in U.S. foreign policy for too long, to the cost of thousands of lives.

Concretely, I ask you to re-designate Nigeria **as a Country of Particular Concern**. This has both a practical and diplomatic meaning, to signal that you are paying attention to what happens to us.

Second, I urge the United States to **condition any cooperation on the return of the IDPs to their ancestral homes** and help for them to rebuild their lives. I implore this august body to insist on the return and rehabilitation of all IDPs to their ancestral lands, and NOT to relocate them to other constructed camps elsewhere, which is an invented solution now being pushed the Benue state governor.

¹ https://www.citypopulation.de/en/nigeria/admin/NGA007__benue/

² <https://acnuk.org/news/nigeria-dozens-of-christians-killed-last-month/?srsltid=AfmBOopuY-UNB3Ci2qBHVqo7WXlvBYSmHH86CQ6mrA470julGoaUEXmJ>

³ <https://acnuk.org/news/good-friday-turns-black/?srsltid=AfmBOoptVMvisQWtqkDJC2QFPVu1m9pZVRraZASrxajEQr7I-vqDw1SK>