

Nina Shea
Senior Scholar and Director of
Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom
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"Conflict and persecution in Nigeria: the case for a CPC designation"

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Rep. Jacobs and Members of the Africa Subcommittee for holding this important hearing on conflict and persecution in Nigeria and for prioritizing this issue as the Africa Subcommittee's very first hearing of the current congressional session. Chairman Smith, for decades, you have been a congressional hero to legions of victims of persecution and conflict throughout the world. Congratulations on your chairmanship of this subcommittee!

Summary:

My testimony will focus on the persecution of Christian farming communities by militant Fulani Muslim herders. In the interest of time, I will not address the Islamist terror groups that are already designated as terrorists and sanctioned by the U.S. Government. They include Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West Africa, which attack Nigerians of all faith backgrounds. Nigeria now ranks 6 out of 66 on the 2025 Global Terrorism Index and the index does not even take into account the violence by militant Fulani herders.

Nigeria is a country of superlatives -- Africa's most populous country, its largest economy and, alarmingly, the entire world's deadliest country for Christians. In recent years, more Christians have been killed for their faith in Nigeria than in all other places combined, reports the respected research group Open Doors.

Currently, militant groups of nomadic Fulani Muslim herders are reported to be the greatest threat to Nigeria's Christians, particularly those in Middle Belt farming communities. That central area is the intersection of Nigeria's mostly Muslim North with its mostly Christian South. In Benue, Plateau, Kaduna, and other Middle Belt states, thousands of Christians have been killed, maimed, and raped and millions of them have been driven from their lands and are now homeless, due to Fulani attacks. This is the heart of Nigeria's breadbasket, and, as their farming families are slaughtered or forced to flee, the region's suffering is compounded by growing mass hunger.

The Federal Government in Abuja remains passive in the face of desperate cries for help and detailed reports of relentless horrific violence coming from Middle Belt citizens and their elected officials, church leaders, journalists, and Nigerian and international human rights groups. The government allows Fulani violence to continue with impunity. There is a broader concern that this resolute inaction evidences a plan to forcibly Islamize Nigeria, in violation of its constitution, in which the government is complicit. Just last week, on March 3, 2025, the Nigerian Catholic Bishops Conference released a letter expressing "deep concern" that some of the 12 northern states that impose sharia law had ordered the closure of

Catholic and other Christian schools for five weeks in forced observance of Ramadan, and citing the constitution's guarantee of a secular state.

The targeted indigenous people of the Middle Belt Christian communities are said to be facing two devastating challenges: constant attacks by Fulani militants and the Nigerian government's decision to tolerate this persecution.

I am, therefore, urging Congress to adopt legislation calling for the State Department, as a first step, to designate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act, as it did under the first Trump administration. Placing Nigeria on the U.S.'s short list of the world's most egregious religious freedom violators is warranted under the Act and would be a foundation for further human rights initiatives by the new administration.

Militant Fulani Aggression against Defenseless Christians:

The Fulani are an ethnic group that is largely Muslim and Fulfulde-speaking, numbering in the tens of millions across 20 countries in West Africa. For four years in the early 19th century, Fulani warrior Usman dan Fodio established a caliphate in Nigeria's north. In recent decades, nomadic Fulani herders have migrated along Nigeria's approved cattle routes and grazing reserves covering four and a quarter million hectares, which run through various ethnic areas. Over the past generation, a portion of the Fulani nomadic herder population has become well-armed with automatic weapons and aggressive in targeting undefended Christians in Nigeria's Middle Belt farming areas.

Nigeria's government has not undertaken a thorough, objective and transparent investigation of the militant Fulani herders' organization, leadership, motives or intent in these attacks. Numerous attacks over many years indicate that they are coordinated, systematic and growing. Survivor accounts, collected by churches and journalists on the ground, frequently report that their attackers spoke Fulfulde and shouted "Allahu Akbar" or expressed other religious sentiments as they killed, as USCIRF noted in its reports. Some, including notably two Nigerian Methodist bishops held hostage, related that their captors told them that "Nigeria belongs to the Fulani" and some let their hostages know that they singled out "infidels" for capture. On March 8, 2025, TruthNigeria's Douglas Burton interviewed a Kaduna father, whose five children were ransomed and released after being kidnapped on January 7, who said that their Fulani captors were all Muslims and contemptuously referred to the family as "infidels." It is also well known that the militant Fulanis invade from encampments in specific forested areas within Nigeria, or cross Nigeria's porous borders from the neighboring Sahel, among the world's most terror ridden regions, without significant or systematic government interference.

Observers on the ground assert that the Fulani militants are not attacking to graze cattle, as some maintain, but to take control of farms, villages and larger geographic areas and drive out the Christian residents from their ancestral lands. A recent UNHCR report states about survivors of Fulani attacks in hard-hit Benue state: "Nearly all the 3,790 registered residents of Ichwa [IDP] camp, and of many other camps dotted around Benue State, were smallholder farmers ..., forced here by [violent land grabs](#)." A Benue Catholic priest told reporters: "It is all about seizing the lands and changing the demography of Benue State. The Fulani terrorists want to seize the fertile lands of Benue, chase away the people from the land, and occupy the lands for themselves," he said.

A 2023 [study](#) by Nigerian scholars on the herder-farmer conflict in Plateau state found that the great majority of indigenous people from non-Fulani ethnic groups believe that the motives for violence by Fulani herders are land grabbing, jihad and Fulanization; compared with smaller percentages, who say the motive for conflict is in reprisal for “cattle rustling.” Cattle rustling does occur but by whom is unknown since that too goes uninvestigated by the government; whereas, Fulani attacks are indiscriminate and devastate entire Christian farming communities.

In Nigeria, Fulani interests are represented by two main organizations, often referred to collectively as the Miyetti: Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association and Miyetti Allah Kautal Hore. They are organizations run by elites within the Fulani cattle sector. Their businesses rely on the nomadic Fulani herders and, beginning in the 1980s, they started supplying the herders with AK 47s and other sophisticated weapons.

Some experts report that the northern-based Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN), supports reestablishing a Fulani empire, modeled on the 19th century Fulani caliphate in northern Nigeria. Increasingly heard from concerned Middle Belt community leaders, who watch helplessly as millions of their people are killed or forcibly displaced, is that the Miyetti are behind the Fulani militant attacks, in order to take control of Christian lands and extend sharia or Islamist rule throughout Nigeria.

In January 2022, citing the “mayhem” in his state, then Benue state Governor Samuel Ortom appealed to Nigeria federal officials to declare as terrorist organizations the two Miyetti groups and the Fulani Nationality Movement, reported a Nigerian [legal press](#). Last year, the leader of the Miyetti Allah Kautal Hore, Bello Bodejo, was arrested twice, including on a terrorism accusation, but was ultimately cleared and released from detention by Nigeria’s High Court. In 2021, the chairman of the Nigerian Indigenous Nationalities Alliance for Self-Determination, Professor Banji Akintoye, urged the United Nations to declare Miyetti Allah a [terrorist](#) group. He accused the herders, whom, he said, are government-backed, of aiming to take over “our ancestral lands for their Fulani people.”

Nigerian press [reports](#) on the two Miyetti groups state that the leadership of both say they stand for peace yet both have been quoted fomenting or threatening violence. A 2023 article gives the following example: [Both](#) Miyetti Allah groups [said](#) any state governor who opposed a federal plan of establishing exclusive communities for herders “wanted crisis to continue” and should be “held responsible for any further bloodshed,” and, it notes, both later denied this. The article also cited a 2018 report of a MACBAN chief in Plateau State who [denied](#) justifying a violent attack by herders as a reaction to cattle rustling and noted that “the [reporter](#) stood by his story” that he did justify such attacks.

Recent Examples of Attacks:

The following examples of recent attacks against Nigeria’s Christians are only a small sample of the persecution in Nigeria. The attackers’ identities are not confirmed since the government fails to investigate complaints and bring justice in such cases.

- On Christmas Eve, December 24, 2023, it was widely reported by the international Christian press that over 200 Christians were killed and 300 wounded in a series of terrorist attacks that destroyed churches and homes and displaced 32,000 residents, impacting 21 villages in Nigeria’s Plateau state.

- On February 2, it was reported that armed Fulani militants stormed a village in southern Ebonyi state, killing 16 Christians belonging to The Lord Chosen Charismatic Revival Ministry and burning homes, reported International Christian Concern. Amnesty International appealed to federal authorities for an investigation.
- On February 26, the outlet TruthNigeria broke the story that over 200 Christians are being held hostage, starved and tortured in a hidden terrorist camp in Kaduna state, in proximity to an army base. The existence of the camp, located near the Kaduna-Abuja expressway, came to light, when, three months after being abducted from their homes, eight hostages, in dire condition, were released in exchange for a ransom payment of \$27,000 to Fulani militants. The former hostages told TruthNigeria that they were chained, whipped and starved by Fulfulde-speaking captives for 85 days. They said they witnessed others dying from starvation or shot dead when ransoms were withheld.
- Churches and their leaders are a favorite target of the Fulani militias: As of this writing, the most recent example is Father Sylvester Okechukwu, a 45-year-old Catholic priest in Kaura county, Kaduna, who was abducted and slain by unknown gunmen at his rectory at St. Mary's Church, on March 4, 2025, and his remains were found the next day.
- Over [six](#) other Catholic priests have been abducted so far this year. At least two priests and a seminarian remained captive as of March 9: Father Moses Gyang Jah of St. Mary Maijuju church, Shendam Diocese, in Plateau state, was abducted on February 19, along with his niece and the parish council chairman, Nyam Ajiji, who was killed; and, in Auchi Diocese in Edo state Father Philip Ekweli and a seminarian were abducted from a parish rectory by gunmen on March 3.
- On January 30, 2025, Rev. Ezekiel of the Evangelical Church Winning All and two other Christians were killed by suspected Fulani militants in a rural village in Kauru LGA, Kaduna state.
- In mid-February, Fulani militants sought out the home of Reverend Bala Galadima, the lead pastor of a church of the Evangelical Church Winning All in Lubo, Gombe state, and, firing three shots, killed him.
- In September 2024, scores of Fulani militants, in Kaduna, raided two churches during worship services, one Catholic and one evangelical, murdering three worshipers, abducting 30 and robbing the congregations.

Nigeria Federal Government's Failure to Act:

"When a particular community is under attack by Fulani terrorists, the military always arrives after the terrorists have attacked and left," a Benue Christian leader told TruthNigeria. He added that "the military seems uninterested in stopping the Fulanis." This is a problem cited repeatedly in Fulani attacks across Nigeria. It was a problem under former President Buhari, who was the son of a Fulani chieftain, and continues to be a problem, since 2023, under President Tinubu, who is a Muslim and, breaking the country's tradition of having a religiously mixed ticket, has a Muslim vice president.

In Kaduna, Plateau, Benue and elsewhere, there are numerous examples of farming communities contacting federal authorities and appealing for help during or immediately before militant attacks, to no avail. An ongoing example involves Benue, where in recent months a Catholic priest and other

Christians have been abducted and held for ransom after Fulani raids on their villages. A priest identified to the press three key areas along the Benue river -- Gidan-Pepa, Achukpa, and Ogbaji -- where Fulani terrorists cross from Nasarawa State to attack and displace locals. The government ignores church pleas to place military posts near these known hotspots and neglects to have naval patrols on the river there, as I was told by another priest from Benue, a state where attacks are surging.

Even the large city Catholic church in Ondo that suffered a massacre in a June 2022 mass shooting in broad daylight by an extremist militia, killing 40 or more during a Pentecost worship service, has seen no justice. Prompted partly by this atrocity and the government's failure to prosecute, Nigeria Catholic bishops issued a statement of concern in September 2022. It urged the state and national governments to stand up to their "primary responsibility of safeguarding the lives and property of Nigerians."

The pontifical group, Aid to the Church in Need, counts scores of priest kidnappings in Nigeria with over 20 ending in murder in recent years. These attacks continue unabated. At least seven Catholic priests have been kidnapped since the beginning of this year, alone, Catholic News Agency reports. The federal government has shown little to no interest in prosecuting or punishing the frequent attacks against the country's churches, whether Catholic or evangelical. Abuja's Catholic Archbishop Ignatius Ayau Kaigama "strongly criticized" the escalating kidnappings of Catholic priests, as well as "those training for the priesthood [who] have also been targeted," reported *Crux* this month; the Archbishop cited "poor leadership at all levels -- local government, state government and federal government."

As a Nigerian woman explained last week in answer to my question about the dearth of outcry about these alarming developments, "we have to carefully manage our relationship with government authorities." Yet, a few Nigerian leaders have dared to speak out against the government's apparent policy of tolerating attempts to forcibly Islamize Nigeria.

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Others have spoken out demanding government action in response to specific violence. A prominent voice is Bishop Matthew Kukah of Sokoto, who criticized the government for "not being more decisive in getting results" in the Plateau torture camp case reported last month. Bishop Kukah, himself, was threatened with death by a Nigerian Muslim influencer in a viral YouTube video after the bishop denounced the 2022 murder of Christian student Deborah Samuels for alleged blasphemy. The Sultan of Sokoto, a Muslim leader descended from the 19th century Fulani caliphate founder Usman dan Fodio, also condemned Deborah's murder and in reprisal a mob set fires around his home. There was no justice in these cases either.

While some concerned leaders urge the federal government to take action to stop the suffering, others conclude that its passivity, including failing even to collect data on the attacks, shows that the federal government leadership is complicit.

Emeka Umeagbalasi, the Board Chair of the Nigerian private group, International Society for Civil Liberties and the Rule of Law, is among those who draw the conclusion that government inaction in the face of relentless Christian persecution -- now mostly by militant Fulani herdsman -- indicates

government complicity in forced Islamization. “The government we have in Nigeria is for radical Islamism,” he told *Crux*, in a March 8, 2025, article.

U.S. Government Response:

The U.S. government has not acknowledged the horrific persecution of millions of Nigeria’s Middle Belt Christians reportedly by Fulani herder militants. The Biden administration removed the first Trump administration’s designation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC). Secretary of State Antony Blinken explained this in testimony to the House Appropriations Committee, stating that the violent attacks against Nigerian Christians have “nothing to do with religion.” He overlooked all evidence to the contrary, some of which was included in his own State Department’s International Religious Freedom Report.

The 2023 State Department’s international religious freedom report, the most recent one, solely gives a neo-Marxian, materialistic theory for Fulani aggression. It described the relentless attacks against Christian farming families on their own farms and violence against priests and pastors in their churches or homes as “clashes” between two rural socio-economic groups fighting over scarce natural resources, a result of climate change. This conclusion ignores the two groups’ religious identities, the pattern of aggression by the Fulanis throughout the years, the shouts of “Allahu Akbar” and other religious sentiments expressed by the Fulanis as they attack, the repeated attacks on churches and their leaders, and the survivors’ own reports. It overlooks any possibility of radicalization of nomadic Fulani herdsman as they travel across porous borders from the Sahel and Northeastern Nigeria, both regions recognized by the U.S. government as hotbeds of Islamist terror. It shows no concern for the automatic weapons widely distributed, reportedly by the Miyetti groups, to thousands of herders who use them to attack defenseless farming communities. The State Department reports the revealing finding of the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa that terror groups killed Christians proportionately in much greater numbers than Muslims but discounts the finding by disingenuously remarking that it “did not draw conclusions regarding whether Christians were targeted based on their religious identity.” It does not focus on the fact that the Nigerian government “tolerates” the violence, that is, allows it to continue with impunity, which meets the criteria for CPC designation, as stated in the International Religious Freedom Act. Instead, the Biden administration stated that Abuja isn’t itself “engaged” in the attacks and on that basis removed Nigeria from the CPC list.

State’s theory that Fulani attacks on Christians are due solely to climate change is echoed throughout the foreign affairs community. Neither the State Department nor the United Nations attempts to examine militant Fulani herders’ intent and motives nor questions the Nigerian government’s apparent grant of impunity to them.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees website now posts an [article](#), dated November 2024, featuring Mimi, one of some two million IDPs in Benue state, alone. Like many of the others there, she survived a horrific Fulani herder attack three years ago, while her family was tending the yam fields on their farm about 30 miles from her displacement camp. Neither her Christian faith (Benue is 98 percent Christian), nor her Fulani attackers’ Muslim faith is mentioned. It reports:

When they looked up, they saw armed men. There was no time to run. The men raped and killed Mimi’s [11-year-old] daughter. Mimi herself was raped and her husband was killed. A hunter later found her injured and unconscious and helped her into the bush. They hid there for two

days before it was safe enough for him to bring her to the camp. There, she received medical treatment and reunited with her two sons, now aged 12 and 15. “I lost everything,” says Mimi. “If you go to my village, everything has been burned down; I cannot farm any longer. And it’s not only me ... we all went through these things.”

The UNHCR author then concludes the report on Mimi with the astonishing finding that climate change was to blame, not the attackers. It quotes as authority for this none other than the head of the Fulani herders lobby, who casts the Fulani herders as the real victims: “Climate change is a new challenge that we didn’t experience 20 or 30 years ago; it’s really impacting us,” says Ibrahim Galma, Secretary of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association,” it relates. This explanation is accepted without question by that pivotal UN body, as it has been by the State Department.

Conclusion:

There is lawlessness and mayhem throughout Nigeria, nevertheless, within this context it is apparent that, for their faith, Christian clergy and pastors, their churches and congregations, and their villages and lands are being specifically targeted by various Islamist militant and terrorist groups operating in Nigeria -- especially at this time the Fulani herder militants in the country’s Middle Belt.

Nigerian Middle Belt Christians continue to be killed, maimed, raped, abducted, and enslaved in brutal attacks. Their farmlands have been confiscated and destroyed or taken over by Fulani herder aggressors, rendering millions of Middle Belt Christians homeless and stripped of their livelihoods, and living in IDP camps, without hospitals or schools. Heavy ransoms are demanded of rural village churches and communities, leaving them impoverished. These attacks are so systematic and uniform that it has led church observers on the ground and others to conclude they are a coordinated land grab to push the Christian population from the Middle Belt and Islamize it.

After years of such attacks, Nigeria’s federal government, at the highest level, has failed to take effective action to stop the Fulani violence. It is amply apparent that Abuja is tolerating this horrific violence that egregiously violates the religious freedom of Nigerian Christians.

Therefore, I urge Congress to recommend CPC re-designation for Nigeria.