



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

**Testimony by Frank Wolf, Commissioner
U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom**

**U.S. House of Representatives – Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Africa**

“The Future of Freedom in Nigeria”
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Good morning, distinguished members of the Committee.

Thank you for inviting me to speak on behalf of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, where I currently serve as a commissioner.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. advisory body that monitors and reports on religious freedom abroad. Pursuant to USCIRF’s mandate under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, or IRFA, the commission issues a report each year with policy recommendations for the President, Secretary of State, and Congress with respect to matters involving international religious freedom.

Those recommendations include our assessments of countries that merit the State Department’s designation as Countries of Particular Concern, or CPCs, or inclusion on its Special Watch List. The standards for such designations are clear. Under IRFA, CPCs are countries whose governments engage in or tolerate “systematic, ongoing, and egregious” violations of religious freedom. Our recommendations for the Special Watch List are countries where the violations meet two of the three elements of the CPC standard.

Unlike the State Department’s annual International Religious Freedom report, which largely documents the religious freedom conditions in every foreign country, USCIRF’s Annual Report includes a compelling analytical case for why a given country should be designated a CPC or placed on the Special Watch List. Given USCIRF’s limited funding, we narrow our focus to the worst violators of religious freedom.

In the [2023 Annual Report](#), USCIRF recommended that Nigeria be designated as a CPC. We have recommended CPC status for Nigeria every year since 2009. Despite our analysis and

recommendations, the State Department has only recognized the severity of the religious freedom violations in Nigeria twice: it placed Nigeria on its Special Watch List in 2019 and designated the country a CPC in 2020. The State Department removed Nigeria from its designations entirely in 2021, without citing any improvements to freedom of religion or belief. Our research and analysis continue to support the conclusion that Nigeria clearly meets the legal standard for designation as a CPC.

My purpose today, on this Ash Wednesday and holy day of prayer for Christians, is to call attention to USCIRF's recommendations and how those recommendations vastly differ from the State Department's final determination on the status of religious freedom in Nigeria. Now, I will express the profound disagreement USCIRF has with the State Department's decision not to designate Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern.

The majority of Commissioners have travelled to Nigeria, either in their personal or USCIRF capacities. We all agree about the severity of the threats to freedom of religion or belief and the deadly implications for religious communities in that country. In July 2022, a USCIRF delegation visited Nigeria and met with U.S. officials, Nigerian government officials, civil society organizations, religious communities, and development partners. Our conclusion, from that visit and our ongoing research, continues to be that the government of Nigeria is perpetrating and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief.

Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria are abysmal. State and nonstate actors are committing particularly severe violations against both Christians and Muslims. Violent armed gangs, including Fulani insurgents, and nonstate entities like the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Boko Haram, which often justify violence on religious grounds, are targeting religious communities. The situation has grown more dire than ever before.

Ethnonationalist fighters in Nigeria have [used](#) religion to further political ends and have attacked civilians based on ethnoreligious identity. These fighters often carry out the most egregious atrocities and human rights violations of anyone in the country, including mass murder, physical mutilation, and torture of victims. This is especially true in northcentral Nigeria, where ethnonationalist fighters affiliated with the predominantly Muslim Fulani community attack vulnerable Christian civilians with impunity.

The Nigerian government is not holding these bad actors accountable or taking other actions to stop the violence, so the U.S government needs to hold the Nigerian government accountable.

The 2023 Global Terrorism Index ranks Nigeria one of the most dangerous countries in the world due to deaths by terrorism. An Inter Society report lists some 52,000 Christians – both Catholic and Protestant – killed, along with 34,000 Muslims, many hacked to death since 2009, 18,000 churches set on fire, and many clergy have been targeted. Nigeria, sadly, is a country where people of faith, and those of no faith at all, live in constant fear of harassment, imprisonment, violence, and death. In only 15 years, more than 85,000 innocent people are reportedly murdered in Nigeria.

The following is a breakdown by region:

In northwest Nigeria in January 2023, insurgents killed eight civilians, beheading some of them, in an attack on an internally displaced persons camp in a region where many Christians have been displaced by violence. Insurgents also attacked a Catholic church in Katsina and killed 25 worshippers. In September in Kaduna state, attackers burned Catholic seminarian Na'aman Danlami to death after attempting to kidnap a priest. In November, at least 10 Christians in Taraba state while another group killed one and kidnapped at least 150 people in Zamfara state.

In the southeast, ethnonationalist fighters affiliated with the predominantly Christian Igbo community occasionally [target](#) Muslim civilians as a part of their campaign to secede from the federal state.

In central Nigeria in June 2023 in Plateau state, gunmen killed 29, and later in the month, 19 farmers in Jos South and Mangu. In December 2023, insurgents killed 25 worshippers in an attack on a mosque in Niger State during Friday prayers while others burned a Catholic priest to death when they set his house on fire. In January 2024, insurgents killed at least 30 people and injured several others injured in Nigeria's central Plateau state in a series of attacks around Mangu town even with a standing state government curfew. Perhaps the most infamous event of all was when Fulani insurgents attacked villagers in Plateau state in December 2023, killing over 200 the weekend before Christmas, including Baptist minister Solomon Gushe and his family; the attacks occurred when many were preparing for holiday activities.

In northeast Nigeria in March 2023, the Benue governor reported that Fulani herders attacked his convoy. In April, herders reportedly killed 46 in Benue while in Mgban, officials recovered 28 bodies after an attack. In May, Fulani herdsmen killed at least 28 people in Guma, Benue with some witnesses accusing the Nigerian army and police of complicity in the actions. On July 15, insurgents on motorcycles killed at least 30 and set fire to the market prompting the governor to issue a call for peace. In November, Boko Haram insurgents killed 11 rice farmers in Borno state. This month in Benue state, herder insurgents killed at least 15 individuals, including children, in the Ugboju community, only weeks after the U.S. State Department did not designate Nigeria as a CPC or SWL country.

Nigeria is a very important country in the Sahel region. With a population of about 240 million, in 2015 Nigeria is expected to have the third largest population in the world. What happens in Nigeria affects not just West Africa but North Africa and Europe. If Nigeria implodes, millions around the world will feel the impact.

Last November, USCIRF held a [virtual event](#) with experts on violent non-state actors on the impact of violence in the Sahel region of Africa on religious freedom. One part of that discussion was the role that Nigeria has both as an economic generator and as a military stabilizer in Africa and how Nigeria is affected by insurgents. Many of the violent groups active in countries such as Mali and Niger collaborate with their counterparts in Nigeria, exchanging weapons and manpower, especially in the northeast and northwest parts of the country. If Nigeria cannot

effectively use its police and army to secure its own space, what kind of message does that send to its smaller neighboring countries with far fewer resources?

Nigeria has its problems with poverty, rampant hunger, millions of displaced persons living in squalid conditions, brain drain, corruption at all levels, kidnappings for ransom, little or no education for many children, and human and sex trafficking. These issues have led to a general lack of confidence among Nigerians in their government's ability to protect them.

Nigeria is [losing](#) much of its youth to emigration to Europe and elsewhere. Young people have few job opportunities, feel helpless, and have idealized views of the West. Again, the government cannot afford to lose critical revenue resources and its intellectual capital in the largest economy on the continent.

The international community has also forgotten the Nigerian people. Remember the Chibok girls captured in 2014 by Boko Haram insurgents? Can we forget the #BringBackOurGirls campaign and the 40% of the girls who have not returned. It has been 10 years and we are still waiting.

And how can we forget Leah Sharibu? February 19 is the anniversary of her abduction. ISWAP kidnapped her when she was 14 years old and has been in captivity 6 years now. ISWAP released all the students abducted except for Leah Sharibu because she refused to convert to Islam. This upcoming May, she will be turning 21 years old in captivity.

Additionally, several Nigerian states enforce blasphemy laws that have proved harmful to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

How can we accept what happened to Deborah Samuel? She was a young female Nigerian student who was beaten to death and set on fire by other students for supposed "blasphemous" statements. In May 2023, a Sokoto state magistrate [released](#) two suspects arrested for the mob murder of Christian Deborah Samuel. This means that as of today, no one has been held accountable for this heinous crime.

Last June, a mob [stoned](#) to death Usman Buda after he made a remark misunderstood by a mob as a slur against the prophet Muhammad in Sokoto state. In November, a Kano Shari'a court [sentenced](#) eight men to 10 lashes each and fined them \$13 for cross-dressing. Police arrested them at a wedding in women's attire for "dancing seductively" among members of the opposite sex, allegedly violating Islamic moral standards.

This past August, an 18-year-old Christian convert in Nigeria had to [secure](#) a court order protecting her from family members accusing her of apostasy or in other words, protecting her from family members who threatened to kill her for converting from Islam.

USCIRF's [database of religious prisoners of conscience](#) includes Sufi Muslim Yahaya [Sharif-Aminu](#) and humanist [Mubarak Bala](#) in Nigeria. Authorities arrested Yahaya Sharif-Aminu based

on WhatsApp posts that the government deemed blasphemous. Mubarak Bala was also arrested on blasphemy charges based on a Facebook post he made allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad.

Fortunately, a court in Bauchi state granted bail to nurse [Rhoda Jatau](#) in December 2023, detained for blasphemy in May 2022. She is now in a safe location. Over the past few years, authorities have [released](#) a total of four citizens charged for issues related to freedom of religion.

Still, Nigerian state actors continue to violate the religious freedom of citizens both through government actions to harass or prosecute, and through government inaction to prevent violence – inaction which itself leads to increasing conflict within society.

Let's not forget about traditional religious practitioners in Nigeria. They make up about 7 percent of the population. They routinely [petition](#) the government to formally recognize traditional holidays but never seem to succeed. Just last year in Ilorin, organizers of the popular annual Ise festival carried out by the ethnic Yorùbá [canceled](#) the event in protest of what they saw as persecution of practitioners of traditional religion. The International Council for Ifa Religion (ICIR) [reported](#) that police activities and Muslim harassment of indigenous practices were in violation of Nigeria's Constitution.

Nigeria clearly meets the CPC standard under IRFA, not only based on evidence that is publicly reported, but that which is reflected in the State Department's own annual International Religious Freedom report, most recently released last May.

With such clear evidence, the notion that Nigeria would not be designated defies explanation. In a press statement last month, our bipartisan leadership affirmed that "USCIRF rejects the State Department's decision to omit Nigeria...as [a] CPC."

We thank Members of Congress for supporting the CPC designation in H.Res. 82, introduced by Representative Chris Smith in January 2023 and passed in the House Foreign Affairs Committee last week.

Despite our frustrations over the lack of CPC designations, we believe there are still important actions that the U.S. government can take to more effectively address the religious freedom issues in Nigeria. First, Congressional hearings like this one provide oversight and accountability for U.S. policy on this vital issue by spotlighting religious freedom violations in Nigeria.

Second, the Senate should promptly confirm a U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria, as President Biden's appointee is awaiting review the Senate Foreign Relations Committee after being nominated again last month.

In addition, we recommend the appointment of a Special Envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin to maximize U.S. diplomatic efforts to address the atrocity risk and religious freedom violations. Like Senator John Danforth did with Sudan, a special envoy would send a message to the Nigerian people, the Nigerian government, U.S. government agencies, strong allies such as

the United Kingdom and France, the United Nations, and especially surrounding countries in Africa that Nigeria is not forgotten or doomed to be a failed state.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2022, the U.S. provided \$1.2 billion in foreign assistance resources to Nigeria—supporting economic development, education, democracy, health, energy and climate, humanitarian relief, security, and more. In 2023, the total Nigeria assistance package was more than \$886 million. The World Bank is supporting Nigeria with an active investment of \$12.2 billion.

In 2012, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) implemented USCIRF's [recommendation](#) to support religious communities in Nigeria by designing a program to provide conflict mitigation and management assistance in northern and Middle Belt states. This is one example of how foreign assistance can be utilized to support the Nigerian government.

Congress should request an investigation of the effectiveness of this foreign assistance by formally calling for the Government Accountability Office to audit monies spent in Nigeria that might facilitate religious freedom objectives, especially money set aside for police and military training. The United States should also make foreign assistance conditional on positive progress related to the various issues USCIRF has raised over the years.

Last month, Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Nigeria and several other West African and Sahel countries. While there, he pledged to provide \$45 million in funds for regional conflict priorities. Congress should play a role in prioritizing and overseeing how American taxpayer money is spent to determine that the funds are being used as intended, while also advancing religious freedom and related human rights.

Finally, Congress should revitalize the bipartisan Congressional Nigerian Caucus to focus on security, atrocity risk, human rights, and religious freedom challenges in the country.

Thank you again for this opportunity to appear before the Committee.