Assistant Secretary of State for the
Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
Riley M. Barnes
Testimony for House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa
"One Year Later: Assessing Nigeria's Efforts to Protect Christians and Secure the Middle Belt"
November 12, 2026; 11:00am

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Jacobs, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the state of religious freedom in Nigeria, and steps taken by both the State Department and the Government of Nigeria since the Trump Administration's redesignation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC), in accordance with the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Act of 1998. This act – designed by Congress nearly three decades ago – establishes religious freedom as a U.S. foreign policy priority and provides tools to address violations of this right around the world.

President Trump's decisive action to designate Nigeria as a CPC on October 31 of last year made clear that the United States will stand against persecution. In December 2025, after Nigeria's CPC designation, I traveled with a House Codel to meet with internally displaced peoples in Nigeria's Benue State. The next month, January 2026, I traveled again to Nigeria, that time with Under Secretary Hooker.

The levels of violence and atrocities committed against Christians in Nigeria are appalling. Particularly in the Middle Belt, Fulani ethnic militias commit violent attacks that directly target Christian populations. One organization tracked an 18 percent increase in civilian deaths nationally, with Plateau State alone experiencing a 161 percent increase from 2025 to 2026. The people I have spoken to on the ground in Nigeria echo these statistics in personal stories of suffering. Ample witness testimonies over the past year have reinforced that attackers used religious language during their attacks and specifically identified Christians for killing and abduction. President Trump shined a light on these atrocities and made clear we must work to protect these vulnerable communities.

Another tragic situation in Nigeria is the continued enforcement of blasphemy laws. State-level officials unacceptably continue to prosecute individuals for alleged blasphemy – or perceived insults to Islam – including peaceful speech, which stands in clear violation of Nigeria's obligation to safeguard expression and

religious freedom. Sharia penal codes are enforced in 12 Nigerian states. Nigeria is one of only eight countries in the world that allows for penalties up to execution for blasphemy, along with Iran and Pakistan, which have long been designated CPCs. We are pressing the Government of Nigeria to repeal blasphemy laws, or at a minimum to move to non-enforcement.

I believe the President's designation has resulted in Nigeria taking these issues more seriously. At the August session of the Joint Working Group, Nigeria sent cabinet level officials accountable for changes we need to see. The Government has reported leadership changes, strategically deployed military forces, and increased arrests and prosecutions. They have agreed to report more transparently on spending for displaced people and to develop a plan and timeline for returning internally displaced persons safely and securely to their ancestral lands.

But we need to see more progress. We will continue to hold Nigeria to their commitments until we see the safe and voluntary return of IDPs to stable and secure communities. We are actively pressing the Government of Nigeria and calling for the release of Sufi singer, Yahaya Sharif-Aminu (*Ya-ha-ya Sha-reef Am-i-noo*), who sits on death row over blasphemy charges. We continue to urge the government to cease enforcement of blasphemy laws.

Our goal remains an end to attacks and violence. The U.S. has been clear that the measure of success will be fewer attacks and lower overall levels of violence, as well as demonstrable progress in holding the individuals who carry out attacks accountable. Abuja carries the burden of proof and there is still more work to be done.

The Trump Administration is focused on action. We are pressing Nigeria to eliminate the conditions that resulted in the CPC designation. We are keeping high level attention on the violence facing religious communities. Earlier this year, the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor obligated $9,000,000 to: facilitate early warning and response programs, support legal defense for those accused of blasphemy; and to document religious freedom abuses in the Middle Belt to promote accountability for perpetrators. And we remain laser-focused on driving positive change and ensuring that the Nigerian government protects religious freedom, strengthens protections for vulnerable Christians and other groups, holds perpetrators accountable, and makes measurable progress towards ending this violence against Christians, as well as any Nigerians persecuted for their faith.

The Department of State applauds the Committee's dedication to shedding light on the situation in Nigeria and support in advancing religious freedom, not just in Nigeria, but around the world. I welcome your questions.