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"One Year Later: Assessing Nigeria's Efforts to Protect Christians and Secure the Middle Belt"

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Executive summary

Despite increased attention and ongoing regional efforts, violence in large parts of northern Nigeria continues.

The causes of violence are varied and multilayered, from regional and ethnic conflicts to land disputes to religiously motivated hostility. But what is known for certain is that communities continue to experience violence, displacement, abduction and the loss of livelihood.

While the security situation in the Northeast of the country is generally well understood, or at least well publicized (a combination of Boko Haram and ISWAP militants, among others), violence in the Middle Belt has been—and continues to be—largely overlooked.

In this testimony, I will show that the Middle Belt faces unprecedented violence against Christians in particular and driven in large part by militant members of the Fulani tribe. Stories on the ground and data on the overall situation reveal that Nigeria is at a crossroads: steps have been taken to reduce violence, but sustained attention and action is required for true change.

Open Doors, an organization committed to the well-being of Christians across the world, calls on governments, including those of the United States and Nigeria, the international community and humanitarian organizations to:

1. Promote religious literacy to prevent discriminatory treatment that violates fundamental humanitarian principles and ensures equal treatment regardless of age, gender, religion or belief.
2. Include local faith leaders and organizations in the decision-making and coordination of humanitarian response.
3. Increase security and work with local communities to establish early warning systems and monitor their effectiveness.

The Middle Belt: Epicenter of violence and growing insecurity

Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the ongoing security crisis in Nigeria and its impact on vulnerable communities.

Nigeria's Middle Belt has become the epicenter of violence affecting Christian communities. Violence includes mass casualty attacks on villages, kidnappings for ransom, targeted killing of religious leaders, destruction of churches and homes, seizure of farmland and livestock, and forced displacement of whole communities.

However, despite the growing violence, the Middle Belt has received comparatively little attention. The Nigerian government has primarily directed its response to violence in the Northeast and Northwest regions, with particular focus on internationally recognized terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) that are most active in those regions (Fig. 1).

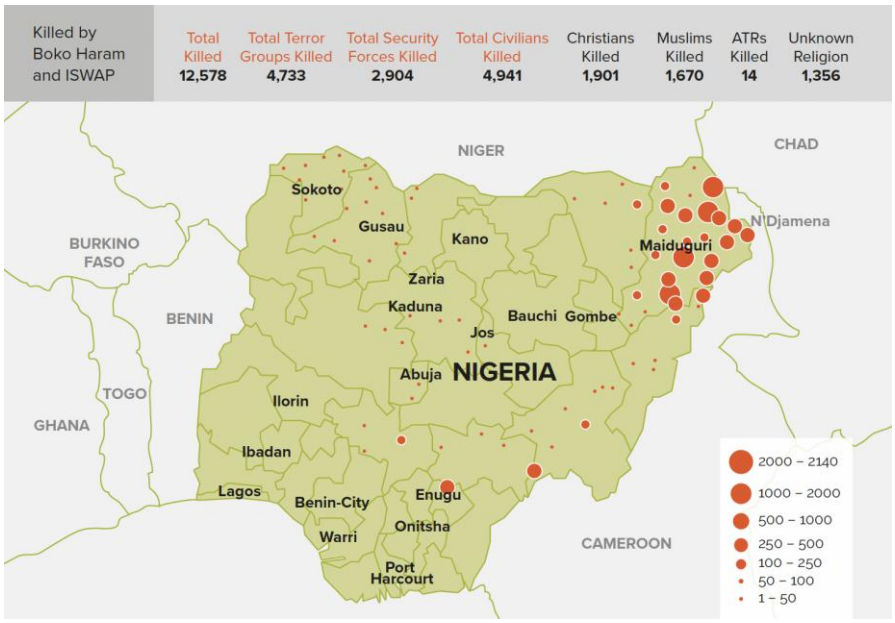


Fig. 1, Oct. 2019 - Sep. 2025

The Middle Belt faces growing threats from actors with less visible profiles. The main driver of violence in the region is militant members of the Fulani people group (Fig. 2), but there are also threats related to emerging terror groups such as Mahmuda, Ansaru (Al Qaeda's cell in Nigeria), and Lakuwara, as well as long-running disputes connected to land, identity, economic opportunity and political influence.

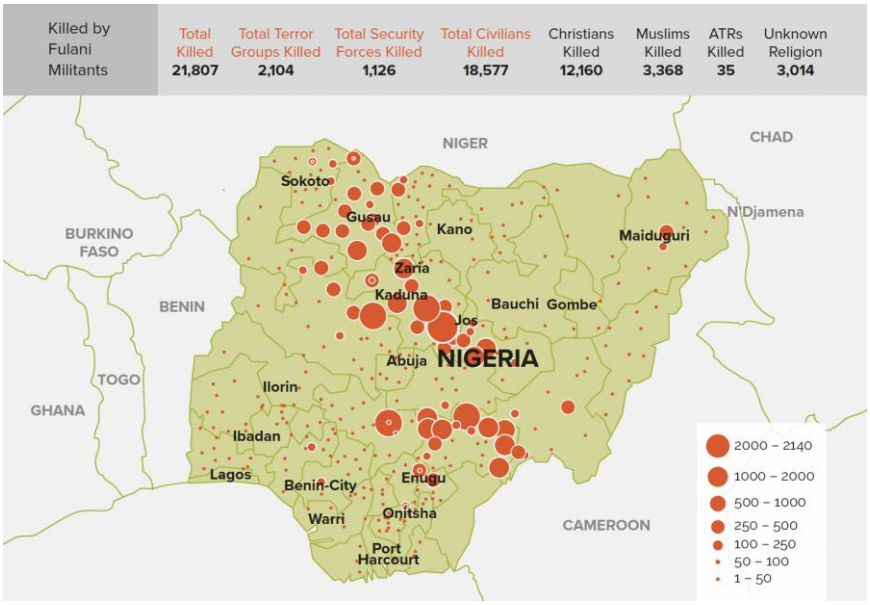


Fig. 2, Oct. 2019 - Sep. 2025

Though the situation is complex, data and survivor accounts corroborate that radicalized, militant members of the Fulani people are the cause of much of the violence—resulting in even more deaths than those caused by Boko Haram and ISWAP. Statistics show that radicalization has had a profound effect on the region (Fig. 3). Between October 2019 and September 2025, approximately 10,928 Christian and 1,919 Muslim civilians were killed in Nigeria's North Central region. During the same period, more than 4,700 Christians and 3,650 Muslims were abducted.[1]

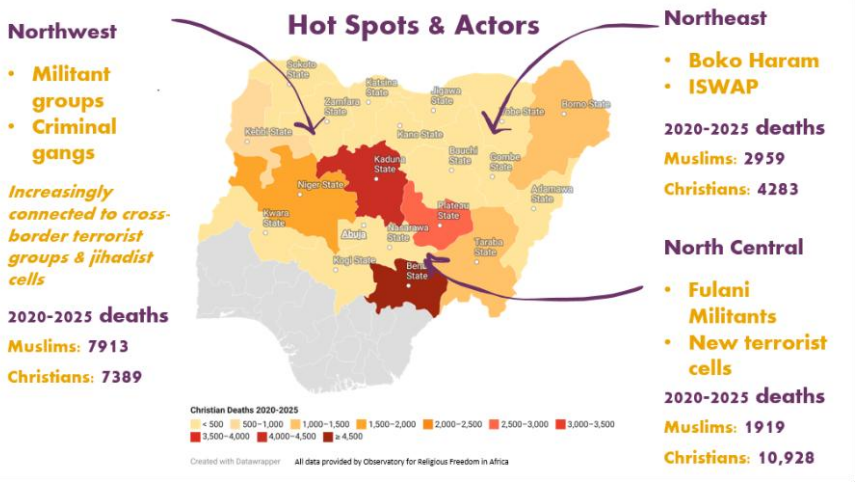


Fig. 3

While levels of violence have fluctuated in recent years, data show that the number of civilians killed across Nigeria peaked in 2021 (9,940) and leveled off between 2023 and 2025. However, our data show an increase in the first months of 2026, driven in no small part by astonishing levels of violence in the Middle Belt region.

For those living through the violence, these statistics represent life-changing events that shape whole lives and communities. In many cases, communities are attacked repeatedly over months or years. Survivors are often unable to return because armed groups remain active in the area or have occupied the land from which residents fled. The resulting cycle of displacement and insecurity deepens poverty and undermines local food production.

In January, Fulani militants abducted 15 Christians in Kaduna State, including a seven-year-old boy. Three of the victims were able to escape, but 12 remained in captivity, facing severe hunger and thirst. Survivors of the attack recount the story of Esther Habila, who attempted to escape, was recaptured and killed—her death described as a traumatic event that left significant scars on the survivors. But the situation deteriorated further. So bad were the conditions that the young boy was forced to consume human flesh during his imprisonment. The seven-year-old boy and several other victims were finally released after four months of captivity, but that child still battles persistent stomach-related illnesses and other health complications connected to his ordeal.

[1] Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa, Killings and Abductions in Nigeria (2020–2025), June 2026

Sources in the region say this story is indicative of the broader suffering facing Christian communities. That includes two young Christians in Plateau State killed by militant Fulani while working on their farms on August 21; the 15 Christians in Benue State killed by Fulani militants on July 1, during an attack where the militants fired indiscriminately at occupied buildings and destroyed vital local food reserves; the deaths of the Iliya Gyang and Grace Iliya on May 13, a husband and his pregnant wife who were killed in front of their home who left behind one-year-old twins—the attackers sped by on a motorcycle and fled toward a Fulani settlement.

Together, the accounts of these survivors tell a story of feeling abandoned by authorities, of being targeted for their faith, of being attacked by an unprecedented convergence of threats.

Religion as a factor in the violence

The statistics on violence speak for themselves. Less obvious is the reason for the violence.

While the drivers of violence are indeed widely varied and overlapping—including ethnic competition, political grievances, general criminality, environmental pressures and disputes over land and resources—substantial evidence indicates that religious identity often plays an important role in determining vulnerability and patterns of victimization.

For example, sources in the region shared the story of an attack on July 27. On that day, three Christian communities in Niger State were attacked by armed Fulani militants and a pastor was abducted. One community member says that as a result of the attacks, “the villagers can no longer move or live freely” while local church leaders in the area asked for urgent prayer, saying “our pastors are facing persecution.” This attack illustrates that violence is driven in part by religious ideology.

In the Northeast, groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP have openly articulated extremist religious objectives and have repeatedly targeted Christians and other populations that reject their ideology. Within the Middle Belt, religious identity intersects with ethnic and territorial tensions in ways that significantly increase the vulnerability of Christian communities.

This is particularly evident in Benue and Plateau state—the states with the highest concentration of Christians in North Central Nigeria—which have faced the most significant violence in the region. In Benue, in 2025, 1,308 Christians were killed and 24 Muslims. Considering the proportionality of Christians to Muslims in the state, a Christian was 7.3 times more likely to have been killed in Benue in 2025 than their Muslim neighbor. In 2024, the ratio was nearly 20 times more likely.

In Plateau, in 2025, 546 Christians were killed and 48 Muslims. Considering the proportionality of Christians to Muslims in the state, a Christian was 3.2 times more likely to have been killed in Plateau in 2025 than their Muslim neighbor.

Additional evidence comes from victims on the ground. Bishops in Nigeria repeatedly testify to a growing pattern of targeting and killing of Christian leaders and attacks on places of worship.

Survivors repeatedly tell us about Fulani militants laying waste to villages while they shout, “we will destroy all Christians.”

Christian farming communities are especially vulnerable because attacks frequently occur during critical agricultural seasons, affecting both physical security and long-term economic survival.

Recent concerns raised by United Nations experts further underscore the importance of considering religion as a factor in the violence. In June 2026, UN Special Procedure experts expressed concern regarding serious human rights violations affecting women and girls from Christian and other religious minority communities, including abduction, forced marriage, forced conversion, trafficking, and conflict-related abuse.[2]

At Open Doors, we do not argue that every act of violence in Nigeria is exclusively motivated by religion. Rather, we contend that any serious assessment of the crisis must acknowledge that religious identity is an important vulnerability factor for many victims and communities. To suggest that religion plays little or no role in the violence ignores the voices of thousands who have been displaced and scarred by the violence.

Internal displacement and the humanitarian crisis

Beyond deaths and injuries, violence in these areas has contributed to a massive displacement crisis in Nigeria that continues despite some recent efforts to solve the problem.

As of April 2026, Nigeria was estimated to have over 3.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), although the true number is likely higher because many displaced persons live outside formal registration systems. Additionally, an estimated 400,000 Nigerians are displaced as refugees living in Niger, Chad and Cameroon.[3]

IDPs generally reside in either formal IDP camps, informal settlements or host communities. In the Northeast, host communities accommodate many displaced families. In the Middle Belt, however, displaced persons frequently shelter with relatives, church communities or informal settlements due to the limited number of official camps outside Benue State.

Regardless of residence, IDPs face enormous challenges in returning to their homes. This is especially true for those who have left their homes due to violence—perpetrators often occupy the places they attack and make it difficult or impossible to return.

Open Doors data show there is a strong overlap between countries with high levels of displacement and countries known to be violators of religious freedom. Data show that violence against religious

[2] https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/06/nigeria-un-experts-warn-rights-violations-against-women-and-girls-christian
[3] https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data/

minorities during conflict can also make them vulnerable to further attacks in refugee settings.[4] Forcibly displaced Christians can face physical violence and psychological pressures, including coercion to participate in other religious practices, threats levelled against them and their family members who may have remained behind and ostracization on the basis of faith.

The application of Sharia-based legal systems in parts of northern Nigeria can also contribute to an atmosphere in which non-Muslim minorities feel marginalized. While experiences vary from location to location, many displaced Christians report ongoing concerns regarding unequal treatment and exclusion. The reduction of international humanitarian funding has increased these pressures. Across many displacement settings, aid resources are inadequate to meet growing needs and leave displaced populations vulnerable to exploitation and long-term dependency.

The Kachia region of Kaduna State exemplifies this problem. Sources from the region tell us that at least 74 communities in the area have been completely abandoned due to insecurity—well over 7,000 people forced to flee from their homes because of violence. Many of those residents escaped with very little, abandoning their homes, farms and belongings in search of safety. Where they were once self-sufficient, they now rely on others for support.

Despite these challenges, some encouraging developments have emerged. In March 2026, Nigeria passed the Kampala Convention Domestication Act, strengthening the country's legal framework for IDP protection. State-level initiatives in Benue and Plateau have also sought to facilitate safe return and resettlement of displaced populations. These efforts deserve international support and sustained monitoring.

Recommendations

The United States and the broader international community have an important role to play in supporting peace, protection, accountability and long-term stability in Nigeria. I respectfully offer the following recommendations:

1. Promote religious literacy in humanitarian response

Humanitarian actors should recognize that religion can be an important vulnerability factor during displacement and crisis. Religious literacy training can help aid workers understand local realities, prevent discriminatory treatment and ensure humanitarian assistance reaches vulnerable populations impartially and effectively.

2. Engage local faith leaders and organizations

Local faith actors often enjoy exceptional levels of trust within affected communities and possess unique knowledge of local conditions. Churches and faith-based organizations are frequently among

[4] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022IP0137

the first responders to crises and often remain long after international attention has diminished. Governments, donors and humanitarian organizations should include local faith actors as partners in planning, coordination, implementation and evaluation of relief efforts. These actors can provide practical assistance, psychosocial support, community reconciliation and long-term resilience programming.

3. Improve security and strengthen early-warning systems

Communities repeatedly report that warnings of impending attacks go unheeded. Governments, international partners and civil society organizations should work together to strengthen local early-warning systems, improve communication between communities and security actors and evaluate the effectiveness of response mechanisms. Efforts should be tailored to regional conditions and accompanied by measures to increase accountability, address impunity and facilitate the safe return of displaced populations.

Conclusion

Nigeria's security crisis is among the most serious humanitarian and human rights challenges facing Africa. Although the violence stems from multiple and overlapping factors, the evidence demonstrates that vulnerable Christian communities continue to bear a disproportionate burden of killings, abductions, displacement and destruction of livelihoods, particularly in the Middle Belt.

The people affected by this violence are not merely statistics. They are farmers unable to return to their land, pastors mourning lost congregants, mothers searching for abducted children and families living year after year in displacement. The international community cannot solve Nigeria's challenges. However, it can stand with vulnerable communities, support effective and impartial humanitarian responses, encourage accountability, strengthen local peacebuilding efforts and work alongside Nigerian authorities to improve protection for all citizens.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and to remember those who have been affected by violence.

Respectfully submitted,

Ryan Brown
Chief Executive Officer
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