**Nina Shea**

**Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Religious Freedom**

**Hudson Institute**

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs Africa Subcommittee**

**November 12, 2026**

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

## Introduction

On October 31, 2025, President Donald Trump designated Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act, specifically citing the fact that many Christians are being killed with impunity there. A year later, the atrocities continue to mount, and Nigeria maintains its ranking as the world's deadliest place for Christians for faith-related reasons, accounting for 72 percent of such killings worldwide, according to Open Doors. Fulani militias are linked to most of the killings of Nigerian Christians, who are being targeted in Nigeria's Middle Belt. U.S. diplomatic pressure following the CPC designation has brought some glimmers of hope, with Abuja carrying out a few notable arrests of Fulani leaders suspected of financing Fulani militia attacks, and occasional interventions by Nigerian security forces. Yet, given the scale of the Fulani militia violence, Abuja must make systematic reforms to demonstrate measurable progress. U.S. military strikes have not targeted the Fulani militias nor should they. It is continued State Department pressure that is required to ensure Nigeria's government turns its attention to ending the Fulani militia violence targeting rural Middle Belt Christians.

The greatest threat to Nigeria's Christians in recent years has been posed by bands of Fulani Muslim militants in the Middle Belt states, particularly Benue, Plateau, Kaduna, and Taraba. In a consistent pattern evidencing a degree of organization, coordination, and funding support, Fulani militias invade rural Christian villages and farming areas and murder, maim, rape, and kidnap for ransom the defenseless residents and their church leaders. Thousands of Christians have been killed and taken hostage for ransom in these unprovoked attacks, which continue to the present. This violence has forced over a million survivors of such attacks from their lands and homes, and they are now destitute and hopeless, indefinitely consigned to camps for displaced persons.

Nigeria's government has failed to protect the Middle Belt Christians from Fulani terror. It routinely ignores Christian pleas for protection, even when security alerts are issued in advance by churches, community leaders, and the American Christian group Equipping the Persecuted.

Nigerian authorities do not seriously investigate these crimes as a matter of course nor—apart from a few notable recent cases—do they routinely disarm, arrest and prosecute suspects for these atrocities against rural Middle Belt Christians. For these reasons, the violent crimes are known thanks to reporting by Christian and other community sources and represent only a partial and incomplete record of the Fulani aggression in the Middle Belt.

Fulani attacks on Christian farmers in the Middle Belt occur amid bandit raids across Nigeria, such as the atrocity reported in Binnari, Taraba State, on October 23, which killed some 60 defenseless residents and included looting of a marketplace. At the same time, both Muslims and Christians in Nigeria's northern states are ravaged by a myriad of designated terrorist groups, such as Islamic State, Boko Haram, and Lakurawa. In contrast to Abuja's complacency regarding Fulani militia attacks, the Nigerian military has been fighting these terror groups in the north for years, and US military strikes and joint military operations have targeted them. Thus CPC designation criteria is arguably not applicable based on the terror groups, which kill both Muslims and Christians, since the Nigerian government is not "tolerating" them.

This hearing addresses Nigeria's CPC designation based on a long-ignored situation of religious persecution that is carried out with impunity, and thus my testimony focuses solely on the distinct situation of Fulani Muslim militant attacks on rural Christian communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt. Appended to my testimony is a list of examples of such attacks from June through October 2026.

In recent months, under US diplomatic pressure, Nigeria's government has made some notable arrests of Fulani leaders. In addition, "President Bola Ahmed Tinubu officially designated kidnappers and violent groups, such as Fulani militants, as 'terrorists' in December, placing them at the same level of priority as armed insurgent groups," reported the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in its May 2026 report on "Nonstate Violators of Religious Freedom in Nigeria: Fulani Militants.[1] These are hopeful signs, but only a sustained systematic approach will determine that Nigeria's government has at last found the political will to stop the Christian persecution in the Middle Belt. What is certain is that the State Department's attention and pressure following President Trump's important CPC designation a year ago is a first step. Abuja began to act after it understood that religious freedom is important to this administration and to the American people, as shown again in today's congressional hearing. CPC designation should be continued until this violence is ended and the displaced are able to safely return to their homes.

It bears emphasizing that, despite some initial steps taken by Nigerian authorities, the killing of defenseless Christians in their homes, churches, and farms in the Middle Belt has continued apace in recent months. It would be premature to turn attention away from Nigeria while extreme violence targeting Middle Belt Christian communities continues and while millions of attack survivors cannot return to their farms and villages due to this insecurity. Moreover, the few suspects arrested for these crimes have yet to be tried and convicted. Nigeria's CPC designation and the diplomatic pressure that requires should be maintained.

**Fulani Attacks Continue**

The Fulani comprise a large ethnic group found throughout West Africa. A subset of those linked to the Fulani herder community have formed militant bands over the past decade, which carry out violent attacks against mainly rural Christian communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt. They have shown a degree of organization, coordination and financing. Fulani militants typically storm through predominantly Christian areas on motorcycles, shouting the Islamic battle cry "Allahu Akbar" and wielding AK-47 assault rifles and machetes to cut down or take hostage anyone they see, including women and children. As a result, in some places entire Christian villages and vast tracts of ancestral farming lands have been emptied of their residents, as they are killed and as traumatized survivors flee for subsistence and safety to makeshift internally displaced person (IDP) camps.

USCIRF—an independent body that, pursuant to legal requirements, recommended CPC designation of Nigeria to the president—finds in its May 2026 report, "Nonstate Violators of Religious Freedom in Nigeria: Fulani Militants," that armed Fulani militants are a main factor in religious freedom violations in Nigeria. The bipartisan commission asserts further that "Fulani militants caused the highest number of deaths among all religious communities in Nigeria over the last year as compared to attacks by organized insurgent groups and criminal gangs." It states that, while Fulani assailants have not spared Muslims, "many militants have targeted Christian communities in the Middle Belt and, increasingly, the South, burning homes and churches as well as kidnapping, raping, and murdering."[2]

Christian watchdog groups, backed by data collected by the Netherlands charity Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA), also assert that the Middle Belt is where most Nigerian Christians are now being killed. In its 2025 six-year report on Nigeria, ORFA found that armed Fulani militias were responsible for 18,577 civilian deaths out of which 12,102 were Christians. Fulani militants were responsible for a staggering 47 percent of all civilian killings—more than five times the combined death toll of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province, which together accounted for just 11 percent of civilian deaths, it finds.[3]

The main goal of the Fulani attacks appears to be the eradication of the Christian presence in the rural Middle Belt, though land grabs are mixed with it. In some cases, the Fulani invaders take over these abandoned areas, but in other places they leave them ghost towns. Church leaders have told this subcommittee that they believe these attacks are intended to eliminate the Christian presence from the rural areas of multiple states. This is underscored by the invaders' routine burning and destruction of churches and church property as they lay waste to Middle Belt villages.

The mechanics of using terror to drive out these Christians were demonstrated again just last month. As reported by the Vatican outlet Fides: On October 12, 2026, Catholic Bishop William Avenya, of Gboko Diocese, Vandeikya local government area (LGA), Benue State, issued a pastoral letter announcing the indefinite closure, for security reasons, of St Winifred Parish,

including its girls' secondary school, the nursery and primary school, St. Thomas Hospital, Salus Mind Care Centre, and the hospital chaplaincy service. The decree ordered the withdrawal of all priests, religious sisters, catechists, pastoral workers, teachers, healthcare personnel, and others. These social services have served as a backbone of support for this rural community. Among the multiple attacks the bishop cited for this parish shutdown were "the repeated burning" of the secondary school's dormitories on October 28, 2025, on May 10 and 15, 2026, and most recently on October 11, 2026. These acts, the bishop stated, "destroyed accommodation for students entrusted to the school's care, undermined years of work and sacrifice, and seriously endangered the lives and safety of students, teachers and staff." According to the bishop, the diocese made repeated attempts to resolve the disputes peacefully through dialogue and reconciliation, involving community leaders, traditional authorities, elders, government officials, and law enforcement agencies. These efforts failed to achieve any meaningful improvement in security conditions, he observed. This is far from an isolated case.[4] Numerous Catholic and evangelical churches throughout the Middle Belt have been attacked and destroyed. Church destruction and closures in Nigeria are typically accompanied by mass displacement.Taraba's Wukari Catholic Diocese reports that 98,000 persons are displaced and 217 churches destroyed as a result of violent attacks between September 2025 and May 2026.

Hundreds of Catholic priests and Christian pastors have been targeted for assassination or kidnapping, with attacks occurring in or near their churches, rectories, and parsonages. The Catholics Bishops' Conference of Nigeria communications office posted a study in March 2025 finding that a staggering 201 priests and seminarians were taken hostage for ransom and/or killed in recent years.[5] This continued in 2026. For example, the Catholic diocese of Lokoja, Kogi State, reported that on July 29, 2026, assailants ambushed and murdered Rev. Samuel Opeyemi Oyetoro.[6] The Catholic priest, who had just celebrated Mass at St. Peter the Apostle Catholic Church in Ajaokuta, was repeatedly stabbed and mutilated, and his body was found abandoned along Church Road. The Vatican's Fides News Agency reported the kidnapping on October 13, 2026, of another Catholic priest, Father John Inalegwu Otache, parish priest of Benue's St. Margaret's Parish in Ajegbe Awume. He was abducted while returning home and held for five days before being released. Two suspected kidnappers in this case have been reported arrested, which is an unusual and hopeful sign.[7]

Leaders of other Christian churches have been targeted for kidnapping and murder, as these recent examples show. Pastor Hills Emmanuel was found dead from multiple stab wounds on August 29, 2026, following his abduction the day before. He founded the Wonderful Grace of God Evangelical Ministry in Bokkos, Plateau State. Pastor Gabriel Joseph Dipak was abducted with him by men speaking the Fulani language and subsequently released. The two were singled out from among nine passengers in a minivan traveling from Jos to Bokkos. On September 20, Fulani militants killed an unidentified Baptist pastor, a church employee, and six others on their way to Sunday services, in Barkin Ladi, south of Jos.[8]reported Truth Nigeria A local resident told *Christian Daily International–Morning Star News* that the assailants were

Fulani gunmen. On October 3, 2026, Pastor Aliyu Danlami and three members of an Evangelical Church Winning All congregation were abducted while traveling through Kebbi State, reported TruthNigeria.[9]

As this subcommittee is well aware, Fulani militias have also invaded the home villages and killed about a dozen relatives of the Catholic Bishop Wilfred Anagbe of Makurdi Diocese in Benue State last year, shortly after he testified before this subcommittee. On July 11, 2026, a Fulani militia killed nine relatives of Pastor Ezekiel Dachomo, the courageously outspoken regional chairman of the Church of Christ in Nations for Barkin Ladi LGA, Plateau State.[10] They both have been indefatigable defenders of the persecuted church, and it is thought that the attacks against their families were in reprisal for their speaking out. Both churchmen have received credible death threats themselves.

For the most part, the government has shown a shocking indifference to Fulani militia atrocities. Below are several examples from 2026; a more extensive list is in the appendix to this testimony:

- In mid-August, 47 innocent citizens were massacred, and another 17 were seriously injured by over 100 armed Fulanis on motorcycles who invaded the Christian community of Ukum, Benue State. Security showed up at the crime scene three hours after the attack ended.[11]

- At least 27 people were killed on August 17–18, 2026, in concurrent attacks on three Christian villages south of Jos, the capital of Plateau State. Among the dead were four civilian guards who were outgunned. Witnesses and local representatives interviewed by *TruthNigeria* said the attackers were Fulani speakers. Equipping the Persecuted told Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom that they warned Nigerian police and military of such a potential attack in the area and asked for protection, but they got no response. The military arrived after the attack was over.[12]

- On the night of August 3, 2026, armed strangers on motorcycles invaded the predominantly Christian farming village of Abaushwa, Guma LGA, Benue State, killing four members of one family and seriously injuring at least 12 others. Residents identified the attackers as Fulani militants, and the youth-community leader described the attack to *TruthNigeria*: "More than 16 heavily armed Fulani terrorists arrived on about nine motorcycles. They spoke Fulfulde and chanted 'Allahu Akbar' while attacking residents with machetes." Police, who arrived after the attack ended, simply described them as "bandits," though no theft was reported.[13]

- Early on July 28, 2026, gunmen attacked the predominantly Christian farming community of Efeyi-Utikpi, Otukpo LGA, Benue State. Media reported a mass burial for 15 victims, including women and children. Witnesses told *TruthNigeria* that they were awakened by gunfire from about 50 well-armed Fulani men who rode on more than 25 motorcycles and chanted 'Allahu Akbar,' and people ran in every direction. Afterward, many families had to search for their missing relatives, and in addition to the dead bodies, they found about 30 others being treated for their wounds at the nearby Federal University of Sciences Teaching Hospital.[14]

- On April 5, 2026, a community leader in Ariko, Kachia LGA, Kaduna State, reported that heavily armed Fulani herders stormed Easter services at First Evangelical Church Winning All Church and then attacked St. Augustine Catholic Church, killing some worshippers and kidnapping 36, seven of whom died under harsh treatment. Witnesses said they knew the attackers were Fulani because they were speaking Fulfulde. Residents also told Reuters that security personnel arrived the following morning, hours after the attack. Security forces initially claimed to have rescued the Christians but were forced to retract that after community leaders disproved it.[15]

- On a Sunday morning last January, gunmen invaded Kurmin Wali, a rural community in Kajuru, Kaduna State. They headed straight for three Christian churches in the middle of worship services and kidnapped 177 of their congregants. They then force-marched the hostages to the militants' camp.[16] Kaduna authorities and Nigerian security forces didn't pursue the kidnappers, but instead immediately disputed that any such incident occurred and launched a brazen cover-up. They warned the villagers not to talk to anyone outside the village and blocked roads into the area with their vehicles. They then held a press conference to announce that reports of the kidnappings were a hoax and "completely false." Sule Shuaibu, Kaduna State's commissioner for internal security, warned, "We will not tolerate the spread of such false information." Kaduna's police chief, Muhammad Rabiu, called the report a "mere falsehood . . . being peddled by conflict entrepreneurs who want to cause chaos." The county chairman said he visited the church and determined there was "no evidence of the attack." Eventually, in the face of irrefutable evidence gathered by others, government officials were forced to affirm that "the incident did occur."

- On October 9–10, 2026, the very same Kurmin Wali village in Kaduna, still undefended, was raided again. Gunmen abducted seven Christians, including a pastor, and shot and wounded another resident.[17] "They came in their numbers on motorbikes, about 20 Fulanis, and seized only two," Ishaku Dan Azumi, the village chief of Kurmin Wali, told TruthNigeria. "The rest of the villagers ran

away, so they could not take more." According to the village chief, the same Fulani group returned the following day and abducted three more Christian farmers as they tried to gather food from their fields. The kidnappers have demanded the equivalent of $11,000 for the five's release.

**The Nigerian Government's Grant of Impunity to Fulani Militants**

The heart of the Middle Belt Christian persecution problem and a critical legal element for CPC designation is that the government has generally tolerated these relentless attacks against Christians. As the case examples in the appendix to my testimony show, bloody attacks on defenseless Christian communities and churches continue, and Nigerian security forces habitually fail to take adequate steps to prevent such attacks, even when they are warned in advance. Rural Middle Belt Christians, thus, face a two-pronged persecution, the extreme violence of Fulani militias and in abject neglect of successive Nigerian governments to protect them from such extreme violence. I have heard it said that the administration of President Tinubu is "overwhelmed" by the various terror threats in the country's North and doesn't have the security forces to secure the Middle Belt. Yet, Nigeria is one of Africa's richest countries in natural resources and can afford protection for all its citizens. That is every government's first responsibility. President Tinubu, like his predecessors, is failing to make the effort needed to protect Nigeria's Middle Belt Christians.

Relatively few suspects are arrested after Fulani militia attacks. Judicial prosecutions of Fulani militants who attack Christians are rarer still. A notable exception is in the ongoing high-profile case of the 2025 Fulani massacre in Yelewata, in which a powerful Fulani leader and others have been arrested. As the *International Christian Daily* observed, this is a "rare prosecution," and its outcome remains to be determined.[18]

In most attacks, Nigerian police routinely neglect to arrest or even identify the suspects, describing the assailants and murderers with the vague moniker "bandits." In hostage cases, governmental involvement generally consists of paying ransoms for captives' release but does not entail routinely arresting the kidnappers, with certain notable exceptions. Nor does it entail the systematic break-up of the kidnappers' dens where hostages are raped, starved and tortured.

Nigerian authorities also neglect to systematically document who is being killed and held hostage. They leave it to the traumatized communities, themselves, to struggle in piecing together the facts over ensuing days. As a result, the numbers of those killed and kidnapped vary and are then declared unreliable by the government and secular mainstream media.

Nigerian authorities also fail in other ways to ensure the protection of these Middle Belt citizens. Nigeria's government enforces hate speech bans and other censorship laws that inhibit and even criminalize local journalism, including about the persecution of Middle Belt Christians. A case in point was the arrest for defamation in 2021 of Luka Binniyat—a Kaduna-based journalist known as one of Nigeria's preeminent voices reporting on the persecution of

Christians in Southern Kaduna—after he quoted one legislator who said that another legislator had covered up the issue. Binniyat was finally cleared of the charges for lack of evidence by the Kaduna High Court five years later, in May 2026, with legal help from Alliance Defending Freedom—and under the spotlight of CPC designation. Another case occurred on October 5, 2026, when Lawrence Zongo, a reporter for *TruthNigeria* and a volunteer for Amnesty International, was arrested for entering a Plateau military clinic to visit relatives who were being treated for wounds sustained in an attack on their village. He is reportedly detained at this time.

Moreover, while Nigeria's gun laws are restrictive, the government does not enforce them against militant Fulani herders. They openly carry AK-47s as they roam the Middle Belt countryside on motorcycles and stockpile them in their encampments. Local watch guards, which Nigerians call "vigilantes," are allowed to bear only homemade weapons and hunting rifles. As a result, they frequently report being outgunned when defending against large groups of well-armed Fulani militants.

The Nigerian government also lacks a comprehensive policy for those displaced by Fulani violence to return safely to their lands. The Justice, Development and Peace office of the Catholic Makurdi diocese in Benue State, for example, told me that over a million terrorized people from predominantly Christian villages in the Middle Belt languish indefinitely in destitution in IDP camps run by the Catholic Church, the UNHCR and other humanitarian relief organizations. At a meeting in my office with Senator Tinubu, the wife of Nigeria's president, earlier this year, we discussed these IDPs. She stated that in her private capacity she was resettling some of the displaced Christian farmers in charity housing in the capital city. I'm aware of other so-called solutions in which displaced Christians are relocated to larger United Nations–run camps. This is neither practical nor just. The government should be helping them to reclaim their stolen ancestral properties and resume their productive livelihoods as farmers in the Middle Belt, Nigeria's breadbasket.

I'm aware that the pontifical Aid to the Church in Need organization, to give one example, is ready to assist in a return effort with a pilot program for three Benue villages, to benefit 2,000 displaced persons. The organization is drawing on its experience of returning displaced persons to their Nineveh towns in Iraq that had been destroyed by ISIS. Security is the main obstacle. In another example, Equipping the Persecuted, an American Christian charity, has pledged to rebuild schools in Yelewata, the site of a large massacre in 2025.

These projects require Abuja's cooperation and assistance to ensure security. Fulani militias, though lethal to defenseless civilians, are not a modern fighting force and are no match for a determined and well-armed and trained national police force. Abuja could supplement police protection with private security agencies and private detectives, as well as providing training and equipping local volunteer defense ("vigilante") groups, along with providing early warnings and other intelligence on the Fulani militia networks. Moreover, pilot programs such as these

should be carried out simultaneously in the other hard hit Middle Belt states, such as Taraba, Kaduna and Plateau.

Nigeria's legislature is currently considering SB 1034, a bill that restricts and regulates foreign assistance, including aid to Nigerian private charities, such as American support for journalism, legal assistance, and the reconstruction of destroyed villages. Assistance from abroad has helped save many lives, and its cutoff would have a devastating impact on persecuted Nigerian Christians and other victims of terror. Vulnerable women and children will be impacted the most. If it becomes law, it will strengthen the hand of terrorists, including the Fulani militias.

**CPC Designation Brought Attention to Fulani Militias**

Despite ongoing Fulani militia violence and Abuja's continued general tolerance of it, it is encouraging that the government of Nigeria has taken some initial steps in acknowledging that high-level Fulani leaders are officially suspected to be behind some Middle Belt atrocities. There is now a tacit government acknowledgment that unlawful Fulani militias exist and are engaged in criminal activity in the Middle Belt. Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Frank Garcia visited Nigeria in July and pressed for the government to better protect Christians from violent attacks. He also emphasized that greater efforts and resources must be allocated to the safe return of IDPs to their homes, and raised the need for justice sector reform.[19] He undoubtedly made a difference. It is notable that a major Fulani leader was finally apprehended only weeks afterward, as described below. The Assistant Secretary for Human Rights Riley Barnes and his staff deserve credit as well for their efforts in stirring the government of Nigeria. Yet, facts on the ground have not changed for reports of the killing and kidnapping in the Middle Belt continue. To give one recent example: suspected Fulani, armed and on motorcycles, rode into a rural Benue village on the evening of November 3 and indiscriminately sprayed the marketplace with gunfire, killing a Christian pastor and three others, reported Truth Nigeria. The police arrived after it ended.

A common misconception has been that most of the violence against Christians and Muslims, alike, is carried out by Boko Haram, Islamic State, and other extremist groups in the north or is merely common criminal activity by undefined "bandits" who act independently. Since the CPC listing, the US joint military action has focused on Nigeria's north. Nigeria's Attorney General Lateef Fagbemi boasts of hundreds of prosecutions and convictions so far, mostly since the White House first began discussing a CPC designation last fall and it is unclear what percentage of these are against those linked to Fulani militias. It has been Secretary Rubio and his team at the State Department who have brought diplomatic attention to the Fulani militia persecution in the Middle Belt.

At a funeral on July 26 for 27 Catholics murdered in a Fulani attack in Kaduna, Bishop Julius Yakubu Kundi made a point of asserting in his homily that the attack "had nothing to do with *reprisal*; it is not boundary conflict but an act of criminality."[20] (In that case, a Fulani resident of a neighboring state was later arrested.) The bishop may have stressed this point because many

commentators—including the State Department under previous administrations, major media outlets, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees—have failed to see the element of religious persecution in Middle Belt Fulani attacks, describing the violence as "reprisals" and "clashes" between farmers and herders. This remains boilerplate language in international media reports on the issue. That analysis fails to distinguish between violent criminals and innocent victims, the armed and the defenseless, and the invaders and the residents. Foremost, it overlooks religious identities and casts the pattern of Fulani militia attacks on Christian farming families only in socio-economic terms, a climate change–driven struggle over scarce resources by two classes of workers. That theory does a grave injustice to the Christian victims, and it hides a spreading security threat within Africa's most populous country.

Working to obscure the religious dimensions of the Fulani attacks is data produced by the Armed Conflict Location and Data Project (ACLED)—the influential conflict data aggregator upon which the State Department, the UN, and the World Bank rely. ACLED's founding CEO wrote to me in an email on March 2, 2026, acknowledging ACLED's policy of omitting religious data regarding Middle Belt violence. She stated incorrectly that religious identities in these attacks are "both unknown and unknowable."

In fact, Middle Belt church and community leaders do know which villages and areas are predominantly Christian, and to the extent that they can, have been recording victims' names and identities and eyewitness accounts of the attacks. And, as is well established, the Fulani ethnic group is overwhelmingly Muslim and can be identified during the attacks by the Fulani language and their cries of "Allahu Akbar." Coverage by international Christian media, such as *TruthNigeria*, *Morningstar News*, the Vatican-affiliated Fides News Agency, Aid to the Church in Need, and EWTN, as well as the secular *Sahara Reporters*, has proved invaluable in reporting the religious identities of those involved and in giving clarity as to the drivers of Fulani aggression. ACLED is either unaware of these sources or dismisses their reporting.

Moreover, USCIRF reports in its May 2026 report that Fulani militants "often coordinate via radio and utilize motorcycles and automatic weapons, rapidly hitting several targets at once in rural, isolated areas."[21] Its research points to organizations behind the Fulani cattle industry. According to its findings, the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) "has faced longstanding criticism from Christian leaders who claim that it has been ineffective at best in reducing militant violence and Fulani herder incursions onto farmlands—and, at worst, possibly even foments land invasions, according to some."[22]

The MACBAN, the Miyetti Allah Kautal Hore, and similar groups function as lobbyists and support groups in Nigeria for Fulani breeders and herders. The State Department apparently has little information about these organizations, whose leaders are suspected of funding and coordinating some of the violence, which is an intelligence gap that needs to be addressed.

Many of the attackers in the Middle Belt are reported to be nomadic Fulani herders who freely cross national and state borders. USCIRF provides an estimate of 30,000 for the number of Fulani herders within Nigeria, though many of them are not involved in the violent attacks. Moreover, many of them likely encounter and are influenced by members of the various al-Qaeda and ISIS-affiliated groups who terrorize neighboring Sahel countries and whose recruits include young Fulani men, as has been widely reported in the media, including in a major *New York Times* investigative report in 2025, titled "A New Frontline Emerges as Jihadists Eye West Africa Coast." Understanding the objectives, plans, coordination, support, and organizational structure of the leading Fulani groups in Nigeria is essential information for the US government as it works jointly with the Nigerian government to defend against religious violence and terror throughout the country.

As widely publicized, the Nigerian government has paid Washington lobbyists millions of dollars to press for the lifting of Nigeria's CPC designation and has undertaken this by, among other things, ridiculing and denouncing religious freedom advocates. One lobby group published a newsletter mocking the Chairman of this subcommittee for the idea that a Fulani militia even exists. Nigerian authorities themselves debunked that piece of disinformation when they recently arrested and charged several Miyetti organization kingpins.

For example, Ardo Lawal Mohammed Dono, chairman of the Nasarawa State chapter of the MACBAN, along with eight others, is facing 57 charges connected to the June 2025 massacre of over 200 Christians in Yelwata, Benue State.[23] Prosecutors accuse him of having directed and financed the attack, solicited financial contributions from fellow Ardos (Fulani leaders), and instructed Fulani Ethnic Militia fighters across Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau States to participate. He and the other defendants have pleaded not guilty.

On September 12, 2026, government authorities also arrested Mamoud Adam, a suspected Fulani Ethnic Militia leader thought responsible for attacks on Christians in Plateau. This appears to be a significant measure and one long overdue and welcomed by, among others, Rep. Riley Moore, who attributed it in a statement on X to "US and Nigeria security cooperation." Were it not for US diplomatic pressure brought about by CPC designation, this arrest probably wouldn't have happened, and skepticism on whether Adam will actually be prosecuted remains in order. He had been arrested two years ago but was released from detention before being tried, reportedly due to the intervention of a sitting Nigerian senator.

The leader of Miyetti Allah Kautal Hore, Bello Abdullahi Bodejo, was arrested this past summer as a suspect in money laundering crimes. The Federal High Court released him on bail soon after. Some reports that he was rearrested in August.

Whether these and other prosecutions will proceed and whether justice will be served for the victims remains questionable.

**Conclusion and Recommendations:**

The U.S. government should continue to list Nigeria as a CPC until Nigeria's government stops Fulani militant attacks against Middle Belt Christian communities and their churches, and enables the millions displaced by such attacks to safely return to their lands and resume their lives with government protection. Those should be the two essential benchmarks for lifting the CPC designation.

Over the past year, CPC designation has resulted in diplomatic pressure by Assistant Secretaries Garcia and Barnes that was followed by Abuja taking some limited steps in isolated cases to protect Christian communities from Fulani attacks and rescue some hostages. This gives the first glimmer of hope that Nigeria's government can summon the political will to end a decade-old relentless and bloody persecution. It demonstrates that the CPC designation process and the diplomatic tools outlined in the International Religious Freedom Act can be effective. Yet the Nigerian government must follow through on these and other initiatives and make them systematic before real progress is seen in stopping this egregious persecution of Middle Belt Christians. Overall in the Middle Belt, the facts on the ground – the killings and abductions -- haven't changed.

To end Fulani militia violence, the U.S. government, particularly the State Department, should press for systematic reforms. The government of Nigeria must:

- Ramp up the number of the national police and other relevant security forces, routinely dispatch sufficient forces in a timely manner to security alerts, provide comprehensive early warnings of Fulani militia movements, gatherings and impending attacks, ensure security forces are adequately armed and trained to deter and fend off Fulani militias and other violent threats, and adequately train, equip and share intelligence on threats with local vigilante defense groups and private security guards.

- Identify and break up kidnappers' dens and militants' encampments and staging grounds, arrest the kidnappers, rescue and release all hostages.

- Provide special protection to churches and church leaders throughout the Middle Belt region.

- Systematically arrest perpetrators, financiers and authors of Fulani militia attacks and ensure that justice is carried out against them to the full extent of the law.

- Reject the governmental practices, policies and proposals that counter these goals, such as permitting the free flow of Fulani militants throughout the Middle Belt, tolerating Fulani possession of AK assault rifles in violation of Nigeria's Firearms Act;

drop plans to provide Fulani militants with land and support for ranches amid or possibly even on Christian lands.

- Evict Fulanis from the lands seized from the IDPs and facilitate the return home of Christians and others displaced by the violence.

- End the arrest of those reporting on or denouncing violent attacks and oppose a bill that would restrict foreign assistance and aid to private charities and civic society groups in Nigeria that are helping the victims of such attacks .

My final recommendation is for an American law banning lobbyists for designated CPCs. This was first proposed by former congressman Frank Wolf and was adopted as a recommendation of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. No one, especially former U.S. diplomats should be paid to conceal religious persecution.

With few exceptions, Nigerian authorities continue to tolerate the extreme violence of Fulani militant groups targeting Middle Belt Christians. This meets CPC criteria. U.S. diplomats should continue pressing on all the points emphasized above, as well as others listed in the important joint statement of the House of Representatives Appropriations and Foreign Affairs Committees, entitled "Ending the Persecution of Christians in Nigeria."

---

[1] "Nonstate Violators of Religious Freedom in Nigeria: Fulani Militants," US Commission on International Religious Freedom, May 2026, 3, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2026-05/2026%20Nigeria%20-%20Fulani%20Militants%20Report.pdf.

[2] "Nonstate Violators of Religious Freedom in Nigeria," 1.

[3] Steven Kefas, "How Fulani Militias Became Nigeria's Deadliest Group While Escaping Global Notice," Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa, July 14, 2025, https://orfa.africa/how-fulani-militias-became-nigerias-deadliest-groupwhile-escaping-global-notice/.

[4] "Diocese of Gboko Closes Four Facilities in Ihugh for Security Reasons," Fides News Agency, October 14, 2026, https://www.fides.org/en/news/78285-AFRICA_NIGERIA_Diocese_of_Gboko_closes_four_facilities_in_Ihugh_for_security_reasons.

[5] "Over 200 Catholic Clergy Kidnapped in Nigeria: New Study Exposes Alarming Trend," Nigeria Catholic Network, March 21, 2025, https://www.nigeriacatholicnetwork.com/over-200-catholic-clergy-kidnapped-in-nigeria-new-study-exposes-alarming-trend/.

[6] Catholic Diocese of Lokoja, "Till we meet again the bosom of our Lord. 😭 😭 😭," Facebook, July 30, 2026, https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1KFZHtxWhu.

[7] "Priest from the Diocese of Otukpo Kidnapped," Fides News Agency, October 16, 2026, https://www.fides.org/en/news/78298-AFRICA_NIGERIA_Priest_from_the_Diocese_of_Otukpo_kidnapped; "Priest Kidnapped Last Week Released," Fides News Agency, October 19, 2026, https://www.fides.org/en/news/78306.

[8] Masara Kim Usman, "Breaking: Pastor, Seven Others Killed as Terror Attacks Erupt South of Jos," *TruthNigeria*, September 21, 2026, https://truthnigeria.com/2026/09/breaking-pastor-7-others-killed-as-terror-attacks-erupt-south-of-jos.

[9] Izhi Bitrus Adamu, "Bold Christian Evangelists in Nigeria's Ungoverned Borderland Fall Victim to Kidnappers," *TruthNigeria*, October 9, 2026, https://truthnigeria.com/2026/10/bold-christian-evangelists-in-nigerias-ungoverned-borderland-fall-victim-to-kidnappers.

[10] Masara Kim, "US Condemns Killing of Nigerian Pastor's Family after Trump Reposts Plea for Help," *TruthNigeria*, July 25, 2026, https://truthnigeria.com/2026/07/u-s-condemns-killing-of-nigerian-pastors-family-after-trump-reposts-plea-for-help.
[11] Ekani Olikita, "Benue Governor Attributes Massacre to Terrorists 'Masquerading as Herders,'" *TruthNigeria*, August 17, 2026, https://truthnigeria.com/2026/08/benue-governor-attributes-massacre-to-terrorists-masquerading-as-herders.
[12] "At Least 23 Persons Brutally Killed as Gunmen Attack Plateau State Community, Residents Say," *SaharaReporters*, August 18, 2026, https://saharareporters.com/2026/08/18/least-23-persons-brutally-killed-gunmen-attack-plateau-state-community-residents-say; Masara Kim, "Fulani Militia Kill 27 in Concurrent Attacks in Nigeria's Plateau State," *TruthNigeria*, August 19, 2026, https://truthnigeria.com/2026/08/fulani-militia-kill-27-in-concurrent-attacks-in-nigerias-plateau-state; "Gunmen Invade Plateau Community, Kill 30, Destroy over 50 Houses," *The Leader*, August 17, 2026, https://theleaderng.com/gunmen-invade-plateau-community-kill-30-destroy-over-50-houses.
[13] Ekani Olikita, "Fulani Jihadists Kill Four Christians in Fresh Attack in Nigeria's Benue State," *TruthNigeria*, August 5, 2026, https://truthnigeria.com/2026/08/fulani-jihadists-kill-4-christians-in-fresh-attack-in-nigerias-benue-state.
[14] Ahmed Kingimi and Hamza Ibrahim, "At Least 14 Killed in Attack in Nigeria's Benue State, Local Officials Say," Reuters, July 28, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/least-14-killed-attack-nigerias-benue-state-local-officials-say-2026-07-28; Manasseh Mbachii, "Mass Burial for 15 Benue Attack Victims as Farmers Face Bandits' Levies," *Premium Times*, August 10, 2026, https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/901847-mass-burial-for-15-benue-attack-victims-as-farmers-face-bandits-levies.html; "Herdsmen Kill at Least 31 Christians in Central Nigeria," *Morning Star News*, August 14, 2026, https://morningstarnews.org/2026/08/herdsmen-kill-31-christians-in-central-nigeria; Ekani Olikita and Mike Odeh James, "Fulani Ethnic Militia Kill 22 Christians in Renewed Attacks Across Benue State," *TruthNigeria*, July 30, 2026, https://truthnigeria.com/2026/07/fulani-ethnic-militia-kill-22-christians-in-renewed-attacks-across-benue-state.
[15] "Easter Sunday Betrayal: Army Rescue Story Collapses as 36 Christians Remain Missing," *TruthNigeria*, April 7, 2026, https://truthnigeria.com/2026/04/easter-sunday-betrayal-army-rescue-story-collapses-as-36-christians-remain-missing; Luka Binniyat, "Seven of 37 Kaduna Hostages Die after 110 Days in Forest Gulag," *TruthNigeria*, July 24, 2026, https://truthnigeria.com/2026/07/seven-of-37-kaduna-hostages-die-after-110-days-in-forest-gulag.
[16] Luka Binniyat, "160 Abducted Worshippers Heading to Rijana Torture Camp in Kaduna State," *TruthNigeria*, January 19, 2026, https://truthnigeria.com/2026/01/160-abducted-worshippers-heading-to-rijana-torture-camp-in-kaduna-state.
[17] Mike Odeh James, "Fulani Militia Abduct Seven Christians, Including Pastor in Kaduna Villages," *TruthNigeria*, October 14, 2026, https://truthnigeria.com/2026/10/fulani-militia-abduct-seven-christians-including-pastor-in-kaduna-villages.
[18] Edward Ross, "Herdsmen on Trial for Christian Massacre as Pressure Mounts on Nigeria," *International Christian Daily*, March 4, 2026, https://www.christiandaily.com/news/herdsmen-on-trial-for-christian-massacre-as-pressure-mounts-on-nigeria.
[19] US Embassy and Consulate in Nigeria, "Assistant Secretary Frank Garcia Concludes Visit to Nigeria," news release, July 15, 2026, https://ng.usembassy.gov/press-release-assistant-secretary-frank-garcia-concludes-visit-to-nigeria/.
[20] "Funeral Services Held for 30 Christians Massacred in Nigeria," *Morning Star News*, August 3, 2026, https://morningstarnews.org/2026/08/funeral-services-held-for-30-christians-massacred-in-nigeria.
[21] "Nonstate Violators of Religious Freedom in Nigeria," 1.
[22] "Nonstate Violators of Religious Freedom in Nigeria," 2.
[23] Unini Chioma, "'Over 200 Armed Men Carried Out Yelwata Massacre, Funded by Fulani Chiefs'—Witness Tells Court," *Nigeria Lawyer*, February 26, 2026, https://thenigerialawyer.com/over-200-armed-men-carried-out-yelwata-massacre-funded-by-fulani-chiefs-witness-tells-court/.