

FACTSHEET: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN NIGERIA

Summary

The first three months of 2020 clearly demonstrate that the Nigerian government's actions have been insufficient to curb the tide of violence, killings, and abductions caused by militant groups in the Northeast and throughout the Middle Belt.

According to International Christian Concern's research, there have been 200 violent incidents involving terrorist or militant groups throughout Nigeria. According to the Armed Conflict Locator and Event Database, there were only 4 days in the first quarter of 2020 with no attacks—January 16, February 7, February 28, and March 22. This list, however, does not include the many smaller attacks that take place and never reach the news.

In the first three months of 2020 there were at least 766 deaths related to terror or militant activity. Most of these were Boko Haram militants and military personnel, with Christian farmers making up the next largest number of deaths.

105 members of the Nigerian military and police forces died in a total of 130 incidents involving Boko Haram. However, only 4 died in incidents involving Fulani militants across the 70 incidents.

The area of attacks has also increased in Nigeria. Many attacks now take place in states further south in the country. States such as Delta, Edo, Rivers, Ondo, and Ogun have started seeing attacks in the recent months. In previous years, these states saw little to no violence of this sort. This spread of attacks has led to the country becoming more divided and tensions increasing between ethnic groups and along religious lines.

Despite the large number and varied sources of these attacks the government only deals with Boko Haram and continues to turn a blind eye to Fulani militant aggression. This is demonstrated by the number of clashes between military and militant groups. The Nigerian military was involved in 105 tracked incidents relating to Boko Haram. This accounts for about 81% of incidents involving Boko Haram. However, for incidents involving Fulani militants in the Middle Belt, the Nigerian military or police were only involved in 10 out of 70. This is only 14% of incidents involving Fulani militants.

Methodology

Each of the cases included in this report were verified by multiple sources, including the Armed Conflict Locator and Event Database and others. This methodology helps to eliminate false positives from the report, but it also means that there likely are cases which are not included. Thus, the actual number of incidents may be somewhat higher than reported here. The numbers below only consider incidents from the first quarter of 2020 in which Boko Haram or Fulani militants were clearly involved.

By the Numbers

With at least 200 incidents of militant violence in the first quarter of 2020, Nigeria continues to see significant violence. The two main aggressors, Boko Haram and Fulani militants, are responsible for a total of 766 casualties and a significant number of injuries and abductions as well.

Casualties

	Number of Incidents	Total Number Killed	Militant casualties	Government casualties	Civilian casualties
Boko Haram	130	574	135-306	153	115-286
Fulani Militants	70	192	7	5	180

Injuries and abductions

	Number of Incidents	Government injuries	Civilians kidnapped	Civilians injured
Boko Haram	130	21	Dozens	45
Fulani Militants	70		10	60

Main locations of attacks

	Number of attacks	Number killed
Kaduna	10	48
Plateau	10	45
Benue	9	15
Deltawsa	8	16

Fulani Militants: Government Passivity Enables Militant Impunity

During the first quarter of 2020, Fulani militants are believed to have instigated at least 70 attacks on Christians and Christian villages throughout the Middle Belt of Nigeria. Their attacks have spread to nearly 20 states across Nigeria and have impacted millions of people. Though there have been no claims of Jihad or announcements of a unified effort to kill Christians by Fulani leaders, this does not mean that there has not been excessive deaths at the hands of these militants.

The Nigerian government claims that there are no religious motivation for these attacks, but the facts show the opposite. Of the 9 northern states that have enacted full Sharia law, only 4 attacks took place with Fulani militants. Of the 3 states which have partial Sharia, 2 suffered multiple attacks, all of which took place in predominately Christian villages.

Kaduna suffered 10 attacks, while Niger suffered 4 attacks. The other 13 states that suffered attacks have no form of Sharia and are either evenly split between Christian and Muslims or are predominately Christian. This means that states with majority Muslim populations suffered, at most, 22 of the 70 attacks. Even in those states, though, all but the 4 were on Christian communities.

According to International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law (Intersociety), at least 1,500 churches have been destroyed by Fulani militant attacks in the last 57 months.

These attacks will continue to take place until the Nigerian government decides to stop them. They must allow states to have their own police forces to protect their citizens. They must enforce cattle ranching which will stop herders and farmers from clashing over land. They must also respond to information about suspected attacks.

Boko Haram: A Continued Pattern of Aggression

Boko Haram started targeting Christians with greater consistency in late 2019. In stark contradiction to remarks from President Buhari in early February, Islamic State West Africa Province, the ISIS-affiliated Boko Haram faction, stated that they are going to continue targeting Christians “for past atrocities.” This statement came in late January during an execution video of Ropvil Dalep, a Christian student from the University of Maiduguri.

This execution video came shortly after the execution of 11 Christian aid workers in December 2019 and around the same time as the execution of a prominent Christian leader from Adamawa State.

If this group had greater access to Christian villages there would be many more deaths. Lack of access is the main reason that Christians have not been killed in greater numbers by this group in recent years. As the group continues to gain more power and area of influence it is likely that more Christians will be targeted, killed, and kidnapped.

U.S. Policy Recommendations

The United States must consider the broader impact that the escalating situation in Nigeria could have on the larger West African region and across sub-Saharan Africa. The U.S. diplomatic mission to Nigeria has great potential to engage in meaningful efforts to reduce not only the current violence in Nigeria but also possible future violence in the greater region. The serious issue of growing and ongoing Fulani militant violence must be raised by the U.S. to the Nigerian government.

The U.S. should appoint a special envoy to Nigeria in order to more effectively track and report on the escalating violence taking place in Nigeria. This envoy should have extensive understanding of military operations, paramilitary tactics, and terrorism in order to effectively advise the Nigerian government regarding the mitigation of the escalating destabilization in Nigeria and the surrounding region.

The U.S. should also conduct a comprehensive analysis of U.S. aid distribution in the region to ensure maximum effectiveness of aid disbursement. The U.S. should consider restructuring its aid to channel resources to organizations with a vested interest in the region as a whole rather than giving aid to the Nigerian government which directs almost 100% of U.S. aid to the northeast of Nigeria. This issue should be addressed and a more even distribution of aid throughout Nigeria should be pursued.

The U.S. needs to understand and broadcast the true nature of the violence in Nigeria. When investigating the situation in Nigeria, the U.S. government needs to ensure that all regions of the country are studied in order to dispel any misleading narratives. A comprehensive study of the violence committed by both Boko Haram and Fulani militants must be conducted. A bipartisan Congressional study on the issue would help to further this goal and inform the U.S. response to the situation in Nigeria, as would the establishment of a special commission to track the situation in an ongoing manner.

