A CASE FOR NIGERIA'S COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN STATUS

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**Disclaimer: This report contains graphic images and stories that may be difficult to read. Discretion is advised.*

Executive Summary

Everyone deserves the fundamental human right to freely practice their religion or belief without fear of punishment or retribution. Each of us has an innate human dignity that affords us the freedom to choose or change our religion or to hold no religion at all. The United States has long been a global leader in promoting this right, with religious freedom being ingrained in our founding documents.

Unfortunately, for almost two decades, the right to religious freedom has rapidly deteriorated in the West African country of Nigeria. After the rise of Islamic terrorist groups in 2009, Nigeria's Christian community, in particular, has faced extremist violence at one of the fastest-growing rates. From then until the present day, more than 50,000 Christians have been slaughtered by violent insurgency groups[1] – and the silence from Western nations on this genocide is appalling.

Under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), it is U.S. policy to advance the fundamental right of religious freedom and hold accountable those nations that perpetrate religious freedom violations. Despite this, apart from 2020, the U.S. State Department has failed to place Nigeria on its Country of Particular Concern (CPC) designation list for engaging in and tolerating severe violations of religious freedom. This significant oversight not only undermines the efficacy of U.S. foreign policy regarding international religious freedom but also neglects to hold the Nigerian government accountable for its complicity in the violence against Christians.

Therefore, this report thoroughly examines Nigeria's poor state of religious freedom and makes a case for its CPC status. The clear documentation and evidence laid out in this report demonstrate how Nigeria meets the legal threshold for CPC status under IRFA. In the end, ICC makes a number of policy recommendations to Congress and the U.S. State Department on ways to address the persecution of Christians in Nigeria effectively.

This report cites both open-source research and on-the-ground information collected from our ICC field staff. Additionally, it includes first-hand testimony from a trip our advocacy staff took to Nigeria in March 2024.

The outcry of Nigerian Christians is falling on deaf ears. It is time for the United States to answer their call for help.

The International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) and Nigeria's Country of Particular Concern (CPC) Designation

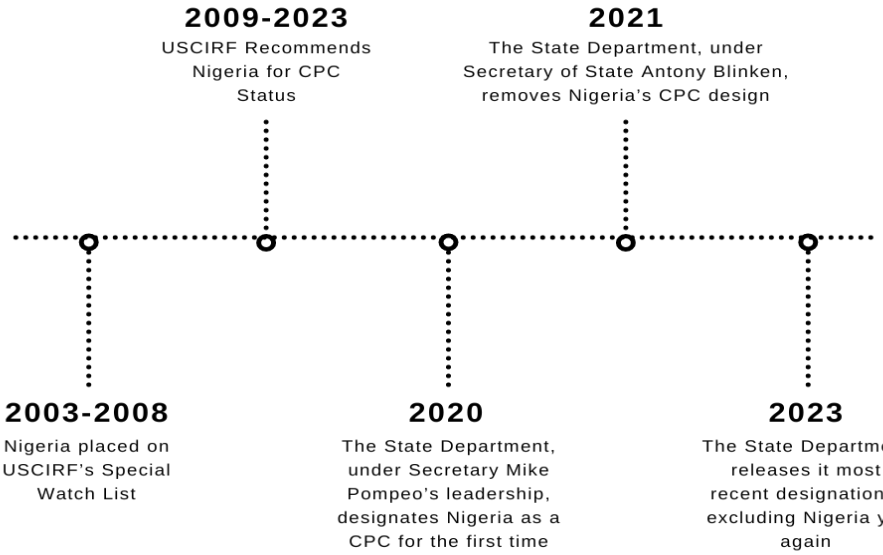
[1] https://intersociety-ng.org/5068-citizens-massacred-for-being-christians-in-nigeria-in-2022-1041-slaughtered-in-first-100-days-of-2023/

In 1998, the United States Congress passed the IRFA, which provides measures to condemn and report religious freedom conditions abroad. Under IRFA, it is U.S. policy to advance the fundamental human right of religious freedom and enforce consequences for countries that engage in or tolerate severe violations of this freedom.

Under IRFA, one of the most severe penalties the U.S. can assign to a country engaging in religious freedom violations is a CPC designation. Every year, the President, who delegates his power to the Secretary of State, must release a list of countries that meet the CPC standard for engaging in or tolerating *"systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom."* Section 6402(11) of IRFA elaborates on particularly severe violations that would warrant a CPC designation, including:

A. Torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment
B. Prolonged detention without charges
C. Causing the disappearance of persons by the abduction or clandestine detention of those persons
D. Other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons

Despite hundreds of reports documenting the Nigerian government's direct engagement or toleration of each of the violations above, the U.S. State Department failed to place Nigeria on its most recent list of CPC designations. This refusal to designate Nigeria as a CPC also defies the recommendations of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the U.S. government's highest religious freedom advisory body, which has been recommending Nigeria for CPC status since 2009.



Under IRFA, there is also a Tier 2 list of designations known as the Special Watch List (SWL). The SWL is reserved for countries that do not meet the full criteria for CPC status but still *"engage in or tolerate severe violations of religious freedom."* While there is no explicit statutory definition of violations that meet the SWL standard, IRFA provides examples that constitute violations of religious freedom. Section 6402(13) outlines violations of the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion and religious beliefs and practices, including:

- Arbitrary prohibitions on, restrictions of, or punishment for
    - Assembling for peaceful religious activities such as worship, preaching, and prayer, including arbitrary registration requirements;
    - Speaking freely about one's religious beliefs;
    - Changing one's religious beliefs and affiliation;
    - Not professing a particular religion or any religion;
    - Possession and distribution of religious literature, including Bibles;
    - Raising one's children in the religious teachings and practices of one's choice.
- Any of the following acts, if committed on account of an individual's religious belief or practice: detention, interrogation, imposition of an onerous financial penalty, forced labor, forced mass resettlement, imprisonment, forced religious conversion, beating, torture, mutilation, rape, enslavement, murder, and execution.

Nigeria engages in several of these violations and could, at the very least, justify a Tier 2 designation of SWL status. Yet Nigeria's total absence from both the State Department's CPC and SWL designations is unconscionable.

The State Department's most recent designations include Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa on the list of Entities of Particular Concern (EPC).[2] The Frank Wolf Act, which amended IRFA in 2016, created the EPC category to recognize entities or non-state actors that *"engage in particularly severe violations of religious freedom."* While some might see the State Department's EPC designations as sufficient for addressing the religious violence that has plagued Nigeria, they grossly ignore the Nigerian government's negligence in stopping these bad actors and its participation in religious freedom violations.

Sadly, it appears that the CPC designations have been politicized. Rather than being used as a tool to advance religious freedom abroad, administrations are dodging the designation to avoid political problems.

At the end of 2020, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo designated Nigeria as a CPC for the first time, receiving an outcry of praise from civil society groups who monitor religious freedom violations in Nigeria. Yet the following year, Secretary of State Antony Blinken removed the designation despite the State Department's own reporting of thousands of Christian deaths in the year prior.

[2] https://www.state.gov/countries-of-particular-concern-special-watch-list-countries-entities-of-particular-concern/

When pressed on the exclusion of Nigeria from the CPC list, the State Department, under the Biden administration, maintains that Nigeria *"does not meet the statutory definition of a CPC designation."* While the State Department has recognized religious tensions in the region, the violence is often attributed to issues of climate change, farmer-herders conflicts, and ethnic divides. **Although these factors are certainly at play, it is a grave misjudgment to downplay the religious components of these conflicts and solely attribute them to secondary issues**.

The United States' failure to hold Nigeria accountable for its religious freedom violations has allowed the Nigerian government to operate with impunity, perpetuating the violence caused by non-state actors and allowing state-level persecution to continue. The unchecked violence and discrimination have led to severe loss of life, particularly Christians, and the conflict continues to undermine the Nigerian government, threaten national security, and cause significant economic loss.[3] It has also weakened the efficacy of U.S. foreign policy tools in regard to promoting international religious freedom.

Thus, it is in the best interest of U.S.-Nigerian foreign policy to designate Nigeria a CPC and appropriately hold it accountable for its failure to protect the fundamental human right of religious freedom.

The following section will now identify how Nigeria meets three of the four statutory definitions of religious freedom violations that would warrant a CPC designation.

Torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment

> "*In areas where [Fulani Militants] have succeeded in taking over communities, they use hunger and starvation to compel women into submission [or sexually assault them].*" – Rev. Joseph Hayab, Chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria in Kaduna State

Nigeria has long-wrestled with terrorism perpetrated by Boko Haram, ISIS-West Africa, Fulani militias, and other armed bandit groups. These terrorists regularly resort to torture and inhuman punishments to carry out their activities. In 2014, Boko Haram received international attention when they kidnapped 276 mostly Christian girls from a school in Chibok. While captive, the terrorists subjected the girls to beatings, torture, forced marriage and forced conversion to Islam, rape, and even starvation. Today, roughly 200 girls are still missing.[4] Other Boko Haram captives have reported witnessing fellow captives, also young girls, being forced to participate in suicide bombings.[5] ISIS-WA regularly amputates the hands of alleged thieves and murders adulterers, who they believe have violated Sharia law. Fulani militants are known for flogging their captives and forcing them to perform dehumanizing acts such as urinating and

[3] https://www.hart-uk.org/blog/religious-conflict-in-nigeria-how-it-has-become-a-threat-to-national-security-and-what-can-be-done-to-stop-it/
[4] https://www.persecution.org/2021/04/20/7th-anniversary-abduction-112-chibok-girls-still-missing/
[5] Boko Haram Fighters Tortured These Women. Now They're Neighbours. (vice.com)

defecating on themselves.[6] According to the World Watch List from Open Doors, militants from all three groups, the Fulani, Boko Haram, and IS-WA, "*conduct raids on Christian communities, killing, maiming, raping and kidnapping for ransom or sexual slavery*."[7]

When we examine the ideologies motivating these groups to carry out their attacks, we see that their behaviors are strongly influenced by religion.

Boko Haram

The rise of the insurgency group Boko Haram can be traced to the early 2000s after a Muslim reform movement emerged in Nigeria's Borno State.[8] The name Boko Haram is a combination of Arabic and Hausa, a local Nigerian language, and broadly refers to the idea that Western influence is forbidden. The founder of Boko Haram, Muhammad Yusuf, coined this name from his staunch opposition to Christianity, Western influences, and even moderate Islam.[9] For almost twenty years, Boko Haram has wreaked havoc in Nigeria, bombing and burning down churches, killing Christians and non-Muslims in mass, and targeting any individual it believes to be engaging in "unIslamic" activity. In addition to churches and Christian villages, Boko Haram terrorists frequently attack bars, gambling halls, and soccer watch parties, as these activities can be considered a violation of sharia.[10]

Between 2009-2014, Boko Haram was responsible for the kidnappings of at least 22,000 Christians and the burning of 13,000 churches and 1,500 Christian schools. Last year, the group was accountable for the deaths of roughly 500 Nigerian Christians, and their violence has continued into 2024.[11]

Islamic State West Africa Province

ISIS-West Africa, or IS-WA, is a terrorist organization that emerged in the mid-2010s following a fracture within Boko Haram. According to the Global Terrorism Index, ISIS-WA is the deadliest terrorist organization in Nigeria.[12] In May 2021, ISIS-WA killed Boko Haram's leader, Abubakar Shekau, further escalating tensions in the region.[13] Unlike Boko Haram, which often kills Muslims, ISIS-WA has vowed to focus its efforts on explicitly targeting Christian communities.[14] In 2022, ISIS-WA carried out a deadly church bombing at a Catholic church in Owo in southern Ondo state, killing 40 congregants and injuring dozens more.[15]

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[6] https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/after-shekau-confronting-jihadists-nigerias-north-east
[7] https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Nigeria-Media_Advocacy-Dossier-ODI-2023.pdf
[8] https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF10173.pdf
[9] https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF10173.pdf
[10] https://www.uscirf.gov/publications/did-you-knowboko-haram-nigeria
[11] https://intersociety-ng.org/jihadist-genocide-of-christians-in-nigeria-bloodiest-in-2023-8222-hacked-to-death-from-jan-jan/
[12] https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-terrorism-index-2023
[13] https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/after-shekau-confronting-jihadists-nigerias-north-east
[14] https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF10173.pdf
[15] https://www.persecution.org/2022/06/21/mass-burial-ondo-state-nigeria-terrorist-attack-catholic-church/

This group has demonstrated a solid allegiance to ISIS through its propaganda videos. In 2019, ISIS-WA publicly executed eleven Christian workers for their faith.[16] Similar to Boko Haram, ISIS-WA has also targeted bars and other places of "anti-Islamic" activity. In April 2022, ISIS-WA bombed a market in Taraba state for selling alcohol.[17] The attack, which ISIS-WA claimed was to target "infidel Christians," left at least 3 dead and injured 19 others.[18]

Figure 1 Boko Haram Killing of 2 Christian Aid Workers in 2019, Lawrence Duna Dacighir and Godfrey Ali Shikagham, Source: Morning Star News

Fulani

The Fulani are the world's largest nomadic group, with roughly 20 million dispersed across West Africa.[19] Their early acceptance of Islam from Arab and Berber traders and subsequent propagation of the religion has made Fulanis foundational in the spread of Islam across West Africa.[20] In the 16th century, the Fulani participated in jihads, or holy wars, which established them as a dominant social and economic force in the region. Today, the group remains the most populous and politically influential among the 250+ ethnic groups in Nigeria.[21]

The Fulani are comprised of an extensive network of lineages, not all of whom subscribe to extremist views. Some Fulani, however, adhere to a radical Islamist ideology. These Fulani are fueled by an extremist notion that they are superior to those whom they consider "infidels" –

[16] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50924266
[17] https://www.persecution.org/2022/05/02/iswap-claims-bombing-targeted-christians/
[18] https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Nigeria.pdf
[19] https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/who-are-the-fulani/
[20] https://via.library.depaul.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1624&context=vincentiana&httpsredir=1&referer=
[21] https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/who-are-the-fulani/

anyone who does not follow their Islamic agenda. According to a 2020 report, *"[The radical Fulani] adopt a comparable strategy to Boko Haram and Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) and demonstrate a clear intent to target Christians and potent symbols of Christian identity."*[22] Jihadist Fulani herdsmen were responsible for the deaths of at least 5,000 Christians in 2023.[23]

Given that the Fulani are traditionally a pastoral, nomadic herding group, the violence has most recently been displayed in Nigeria's Middle-Belt region as desertification pushes the herders southward into predominately Christian farming areas. While other factors are at play, such as economic prosperity and the desire for land grabbing, the conflict cannot merely be reduced to a clash of resources or farmers-herders violence. Instead, the attacks have become far more "*sinister than simple land disputes that boil over into violence.*"[24] The Fulani strategically target Christian communities, key Christian leaders, and churches. The Fulani are known to enter Christan villages, cut off limbs and other body parts of their victims, rape women and girls, and torture their captives.[25] On Christmas Eve 2023, Fulani militants made world headlines as they killed more than 200 Christians in a coordinated string of attacks against 21 Christian villages.[26]

> **ON THE GROUND TESTIMONY -** Local Christians told ICC staff in March 2024, "*The Fulani herdsmen who hold extremist views believe that wherever they go with their cattle is land that Allah gave them. So, anyone who gets in their way is getting in the way of Allah. Since the Fulani do not own land, they let the cows graze wherever – and when that is on the property of Christians, the farmers are killed.*"

Examples of Torture

At the core of each of these terrorist groups is an ideological motivation to eradicate Christianity and any non-Islamic influence that hinders the establishment of an Islamic state. Thus, we must consider this religiously motivated element when looking at the types of torture, inhuman, and degrading punishment that would warrant a CPC designation.

The following table examines a number of tactics used by Islamic terrorist groups to torture Christians and religious minorities.

Types of Torture	2023 Case Example

[22] https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/media/2020-APPG-commentary-final.pdf
[23] https://intersociety-ng.org/jihadist-genocide-of-christians-in-nigeria-bloodiest-in-2023-8222-hacked-to-death-from-jan-jan/
[24] https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/who-are-the-fulani/
[25] https://www.persecution.org/projects/poy/
[26] https://www.persecution.org/2023/12/28/nearly-200-nigerians-killed-in-christmas-eve-massacre/

Burned alive	**In January 2023**, bandits set the house of a Catholic priest on fire, burning him alive inside.
Amputations	**In July 2016,** a Christian pastor lost his left hand due to a Fulani terrorist cutting it off with a sword.
Floggings	**In October 2023,** three Benedictine monks were kidnapped by suspected Fulani and flogged daily by their captors.
Death by machete	**In October 2023,** a Christian doctor was macheted to death by unidentified extremists.
Inhuman living conditions (starvation/dehydration, forced to urinate/defecate on themselves, etc.)	**In May 2022,** a Christian pastor was kidnapped and starved, dehydrated, forced to walk miles without shoes, wear the same clothes with no shower for a month, and had no shelter from the rain.
Sexual assault and/or rape	**In October 2023,** Fulani militants sexually assaulted and raped at least 13 women in a majority-Christian village in Gwer West county.
Shooting	**In August 2023,** terrorists shot a Christian pastor in the head as he was working on his farm.
Mass killing	**In May 2023,** Fulani herdsmen killed 43 Christians in a coordinated string of attacks in Nasarawa state.
Beheadings	**In November 2023,** while tending his crops, terrorists beheaded a Christian man who instructed children in the Church of Christ in All Nations.

ICC STORY – In June 2023, Fulani herdsmen attacked a village in Plateau state. As one family was fleeing in their car, gunmen shot into the vehicle, killing everyone except a young mother and her two-month-old baby. The militants left, thinking everyone in the car was dead. When the baby started to cry, the mother tried to breastfeed the child, and the Fulani returned to shoot the mother dead. The bullet passed through the mother, damaging the baby's spinal cord. By a miracle, the child survived, and ICC was able to provide aid for the baby's surgery.

Some argue that the designation of Boko Haram and ISIS-WA as EPCs is sufficient for addressing religious torture and violence in Nigeria. However, this approach overlooks the terror caused by Fulani militants and neglects the Nigerian government's role, including its tolerance and sometimes active involvement in the violence. Both Christian and Muslim leaders have

criticized the Nigerian government's lack of response to the conflict – such as in the 2023 Christmas Eve attacks, which left over 200 Christians dead. The Sultan of Sokoto, Sa'ad Abubakar, blamed security agencies for their failure to gather intelligence, which could have prevented the deadly attack.[27] Other reports show that thirty-seven distress calls were made to security officials warning of the impending attack.[28] Yet, the government failed to protect those Christian communities.

In the northeast, civilians report that Nigerian security forces "*deliberately avoid responding to warnings of violence until after attacks have taken place*." [29] If they do respond, Christians observe officials responding with more urgency to Muslim communities. In September 2023, Fulani extremists set the St. Raphael Fadan Kamantan Parish ablaze in a botched kidnapping attempt, where Catholic seminarian Na'aman Danlami was burned alive. Although a government checkpoint was a kilometer away, there was no reaction or support from military forces.[30] In other cases, the government remains quiet after attacks. Local authorities were silent in May 2023 after Fulani herdsmen killed 43 Christians in a string of attacks in Nasarawa state.[31]

These corrupt responses can largely be attributed to the shortcomings of Nigeria's security sector. The military and police forces are federalized, yet they suffer from chronic understaffing, inadequate equipment, and insufficient funding. Consequently, officers frequently go unpaid, resorting to selling weapons to bad actors and exploiting the civilians they are supposed to protect. According to USCIRF, this model has allowed federal security forces to illicitly thrive by *"making money through intimidation, abduction, and attack, including attacking religious leaders and infrastructures."*[32]

At the local and state levels, some officials have responded to the federal government's poor capacity by calling on civilians to arm themselves.[33] In many parts of the country, this has emboldened vigilante groups to intervene – although, with poor supervision and training, they have been implicated in similar human rights and religious freedom abuses.[34] Regional security forces are also known for extensive human rights abuses during counterinsurgency operations, including *"arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearance, and torture*."[35]

Causing the disappearance of persons by the abduction or clandestine detention of those persons

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[27] https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/12/plateau-killing-bandits-ahead-of-govt-take-action-now-sultan-tells-tinubu/
[28] https://www.thecable.ng/middle-belt-forum-gunmen-have-sent-letter-of-impending-attack-to-plateau-community/amp/
[29] https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-02-06/debates/98F5C871-AA63-4DD6-AB34-01D71B355C10/FreedomOfReligionAndBeliefInNigeria
[30] https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/255321/seminarian-in-nigeria-burned-alive-in-botched-kidnapping
[31] https://www.christianpost.com/news/pastor-among-43-christians-killed-by-herdsman-in-nigeria.html
[32] https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-09/2022%20Violence%20in%20Nigeria%20Policy%20Update.pdf
[33] https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/6/29/analysis-nigerian-states-call-to-arms-could-spur-state-of-anarchy
[34] https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-09/2022%20Violence%20in%20Nigeria%20Policy%20Update.pdf
[35] https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF10173.pdf

Unchecked terrorism has led to a kidnapping epidemic in Nigeria. As argued previously, the jihadist motives fueling the violence disproportionately affect Christian communities. In 2023, at least 4,700 Christians were abducted.[36] In cases where civilians are kidnapped in mass, terrorists will separate Christians from Muslims and release the latter.[37]

Jihadist-motivated kidnappings are two-fold. In some cases, Islamic extremists seek to terrorize Christian communities and enslave them for their operations. While in captivity, Christian women are vulnerable to rape, sexual enslavement, forced marriage to Boko Haram and IS-WA fighters, and forced conversion to Islam. They are often used as human shields or collateral in negotiations.[38] Young boys are targeted for recruitment as the next generation of terrorists.[39]

In other cases, Christians are held for ransom. Pastors, fathers, and rabbis are prized targets for kidnappings as perpetrators believe they can produce financial windfalls.[40] The bishop of Nigeria's Sokoto Diocese reported that more than 30 million naira (approx. $37,000 USD) was paid in ransoms in 2023 to release religious clergy in the north.[41]

Unfortunately, Nigeria's kidnapping industry has grown into a multi-million-dollar enterprise, with additional factors such as political, ethnic, and financial motivations adding complexity.[42] Furthermore, as Nigeria is a highly religious country, individuals are often not targeted **because of their faith** but instead, just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.[43]

These motivators are certainly a human rights issue, but in the context of Nigeria's CPC status, it is crucial to focus on abduction cases that prove a clear religious motive. Thus, the following case examples from 2023 demonstrate the ***disappearance of persons by the abduction or clandestine detention of those persons*** and meet one or more of the following criteria.

The individual or group was:

- Kidnapped because of a religious position or title they held
- Targeted for kidnapping because of their faith
- Kidnapped from a place of worship
- Kidnapped from a home or complex designated for specific religious groups (i.e., monastery)
- Kidnapped from a predominately Christian village
- Kidnapped during a worship service, either in a physical building or out in the open

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[36] https://www.opendoors.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/6-Nigeria-Media-Advocacy-Dossier-ODI-2024.pdf
[37] https://www.christianmessenger.in/nigerian-christians-struggle-to-raise-ransom-money-for-kidnapped-women/
[38] https://www.opendoors.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/6-Nigeria-Media-Advocacy-Dossier-ODI-2024.pdf
[39] https://www.opendoors.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/6-Nigeria-Media-Advocacy-Dossier-ODI-2024.pdf
[4040] https://cruxnow.com/church-in-africa/2023/07/in-nigeria-kidnapping-priests-becomes-a-growth-industry
[41] https://www.ncregister.com/cna/nigerian-bishop-tens-of-thousands-spent-to-rescue-kidnapped-priests-seminarians
[42] https://www.sbmintel.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/202208_The-economics-of-Nigerias-kidnap-industry.pdf
[43] https://www.mnnonline.org/news/three-factors-driving-nigerias-kidnapping-crisis/

Date	Case
January 14, 2023	Father Michael Olubunmi Olofinlade was kidnapped while on a pastoral visit in the Oye Local Government Area in Ekiti state.[44]
January 15, 2023	Twenty-six women and two infants were kidnapped from the Global Mission Church in Gidan Haruna village. The militants shouted "*Allahu Akhbar*" as they rounded up congregants. The kidnappers demanded a ransom of 800,000 naira (approx. $568 USD).[45]
January 17, 2023	Islamic extremists attacked St. Monica's Catholic Church in Kaduna state and kidnapped a teacher.[46]
January 25, 2023	Pastor Jerry Hinjari of Christ Nation International was abducted from his home in Yola, Asamawa. His body was later found on a roadside in the city.[47]
April 2, 2023	Three Christians were kidnapped during a prayer vigil at a church in the village of Akenawe in Benue state.[48]
April 3, 2023	Eight Christian school girls were kidnapped from the Government Secondary School, a public high school in Awon.[49]
April 15, 2023	Father Michael Ifeanyi Asomugha was kidnapped while driving back from a diaconal ordination. Kidnappers targeted his car by placing a large rock on the road to block his car.[50]
April 30, 2023	Father Chochos Kunav and Father Ralph Ogigba were kidnapped on the way home from visiting a nearby parish.[51]
May 7, 2023	Twenty-five Christians were kidnapped during a worship service at Bege Baptist Church in Madala village, in the Chikun Local Government Area.[52]
May 19, 2023	Fr Jude Kingsley Maduka, a parish priest, was abducted while visiting a newly built chapel in the Ogii village of Okigwe.[53]
June 2, 2023	Father Stanislaus Mbamara was kidnapped in the Nnewi Diocese while performing pastoral duties.[54]
June 11, 2023	Father Jeremiah Yakubu, a priest of Kafanchan Diocese was kidnapped.[55]

[44] https://www.aciafrica.org/news/7449/catholic-diocese-of-ekiti-in-nigeria-appealing-for-prayers-for-kidnapped-priest
[45] https://www.csi-int.org/news/nigeria-in-katsina-state-christians-live-in-fear-of-abduction/
[46] https://morningstarnews.org/2023/01/terrorists-kill-kidnap-christians-in-northern-and-southern-nigeria/
[47] https://www.christianpost.com/news/pastor-killed-after-being-abducted-from-home-in-nigeria.html
[48] https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/nigeria-palmsunday-attack/
[49] https://morningstarnews.org/2023/11/terrorists-kill-christian-kidnap-25-others-in-northern-nigeria/
[50] https://www.fides.org/en/news/73806-AFRICA_NIGERIA_The_kidnapping_of_a_priest_of_the_diocese_of_Okigwe_is_just_the_latest_in_a_long_line
[51] https://www.fides.org/en/news/73712-AFRICA_NIGERIA_Two_other_Catholic_priests_kidnapped_in_southern_Nigeria
[52] https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/nigeria-kidnap-attack/
[53] https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-05/another-priest-kidnapped-in-nigeria.html
[54] https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/254606/missionary-priest-abducted-in-nigeria-s-jos-archdiocese-security-guard-killed
[55] https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/254555/nigeria-s-diocese-of-kafanchan-appeals-for-intense-prayers-for-abducted-priest

June 17, 2023	Father Marcellus Nwaohuocha was kidnapped from the St. Paul Bomo Parish in the Archdiocese of Jos.[56]
July 10, 2023	Joseph Azubuike, a Catholic priest, and three others were kidnapped near the pastor's home after returning from religious duties.[57]
August 3, 2023	A Catholic Priest and seminarian were kidnapped from St. Luke's Catholic Church-Gvenda.[58]
August 24, 2023	Two brothers were kidnapped from the predominantly Christian community of Wusasa. The brothers worked for St. Luke's Anglican Hospital and had fled to Zaria from Ikara in Kuduna state after their father was kidnapped there.[59]
September 2023	A Christian man named Luka Izang was kidnapped in Plateau state. The two men who came to pay his ransom were killed.[60]
September 7, 2023	Two Christian men, Ezekiel Nuhu and his father, were kidnapped in Kaduna.[61]
September 13, 2023	Rev. Usman Umaru of the Evangelical Winning All Church and two Christians were kidnapped in Jos East County, Plateau state.[62]
September 15, 2023	Thirty-two Christians were kidnapped from Dogon Noma village following an attack on the Christian village, which led to the death of 23 pastors.[63]
September 17, 2023	Father Marcellinus Obioma Okide was kidnapped on his way to St. Mary Amofia-Agu Affa Parish, where he serves as parish priest. Six others traveling with him were also kidnapped.[64]
September 20, 2023	A Christian student from Kaduna State University was kidnapped and forcibly converted to Islam.[65]
September 27, 2023	In a series of coordinated attacks, militia kidnapped 27 people in the Gabachuwa community of the Kachia Local Government Area. The majority of those kidnapped were members of the Evangelical Church Winning All.[66]
September 29, 2023	A church choir of 17 members from the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) was kidnapped on their way to perform at a funeral. The terrorists demanded 50 million naira ($64,770 USD) for their release.[67]
September 30, 2023	Nineteen Christians were abducted from the predominately Christian Angwan Waku village in the Kufana area of Kajuru County.[68]
October 5, 2023	Three Catholic nuns, a seminarian, and their driver were kidnapped on the way to a funeral along the road to Mbano town.[69]
October 7, 2023	Thirty Christian farmers were abducted as they were working on a farm in southern Kaduna state.[70]

[56] https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/254606/missionary-priest-abducted-in-nigeria-s-jos-archdiocese-security-guard-killed
[57] https://www.fides.org/en/news/73991-AFRICA_NIGERIA_Catholic_priest_kidnapped_on_Monday_released
[58] https://www.persecution.org/2023/08/10/two-tanzanian-christians-kidnapped-in-nigeria/
[59] https://www.christianpost.com/news/baptist-pastor-killed-2-christians-kidnapped-in-nigeria.html
[60] https://newsnownigeria.ng/kidnappers-kill-two-men-who-came-to-deliver-ransom-in-plateau/
[61] https://acninternational.org/a8-seminarian-brutally-murdered-and-another-kidnapped-in-nigeria/
[62] https://morningstarnews.org/2023/09/pastor-two-other-christians-kidnapped-in-nigeria/
[63] https://morningstarnews.org/2023/09/herdsmen-kill-15-christians-kidnap-32-others-in-nigeria/
[64] https://theleaven.org/nigerian-priest-kidnapped-on-the-way-to-his-parish-church-has-been-freed/
[65] https://morningstarnews.org/2023/10/christian-co-ed-kidnapped-forced-to-convert-in-nigeria/
[66] https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/49-christians-killed-27-kidnapped-in-central-nigeria/
[67] https://morningstarnews.org/2023/10/christian-slain-others-kidnapped-in-separate-areas-of-nigeria/
[68] https://morningstarnews.org/2023/10/christian-slain-others-kidnapped-in-separate-areas-of-nigeria/
[69] https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/three-kidnapped-sisters-nigeria-released-after-nine-days
[70] https://morningstarnews.org/2023/10/terrorists-kidnap-at-least-30-christians-in-nigeria/

October 17, 2023	Three Benedictine monks were kidnapped during the night from the Eruku Monastery in Kwara state.[71] One of the monks, Brother Godwin Eze, was eventually shot and his body thrown into a river.
October 29, 2023	Rev. Fr. Thaddeus Tarhembe of the Ibi Local Council of Taraba state was abducted from his parish.[72]
October 31, 2023	Twenty-five Christians were kidnapped by Fulani militants in the southern Kaduna state village of Ungwan Baka, Kachia County.[73]
November 4, 2023	Father Andrew Anana was kidnapped at Godogodo in Jema'a Local Government Area.[74]
November 11, 2023	Rev. David Musa of the Evangelical Church Winning All was kidnapped from his farm, and captors demanded a ransom. Rev. Musa was shot to death when the congregation was unable to pay the full ransom amount of 20 million naira (approx. $23,676 USD).[75]
November 17, 2023	Rev. Joshua Amako Maraya of the Evangelical Church Winning All was kidnapped with his wife in Damakasuwa town. Rev. Maraya was later killed.[76]
November 29, 2023	Pastor Bala, Keziya Ayuba, and Synday Ayuba were kidnapped from a predominately Christian village in Bassa County.[77]
December 19, 2023	Rev. Elkanah Ayuba, Rev. Simon Ezra, and 18 others were kidnapped for ransom in Taraba state. When church congregants gathered to pay the 11 million naira (approx. $12,264 USD), the terrorists only released the two Muslims who had been in the group.[78]

These cases represent at least 281 people who were kidnapped because of their faith. Naturally, many cases go unreported, resulting in a significant understatement of the sheer volume of kidnappings. As discussed earlier, the Nigerian government is largely unresponsive and even complicit in the kidnappings – making a clear case for Nigeria's CPC status.[79]

Other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons

The Nigerian government engages in religious freedom violations that clearly deny the rights to life, liberty, or the security of persons to Nigerians. Of greatest concern is the practice of sharia law in twelve of Nigeria's northern states. Nigeria's constitution permits legal pluralism and the establishment of state-level sharia courts. The law limits Islamic jurisprudence to matters of "*personal law*" and cases where "*all parties are Muslims*."[80] Prior to 2000, sharia was practiced in a limited manner with minimal effect on non-Muslims. However, this changed in the early 2000s when Zamfara state allowed sharia courts to review criminal matters. Other states quickly followed suit.

[71] https://www.vaticannews.va/en/africa/news/2023-10/nigerian-church-reeling-from-relentless-kidnappings.html
[72] AFRICA/NIGERIA - Bandits attack rectory and kidnap parish priest in north-east Nigeria - Agenzia Fides
[73] https://morningstarnews.org/2023/11/terrorists-kill-christian-kidnap-25-others-in-northern-nigeria/
[74] https://www.churchinneed.org/kidnapping-of-priests-still-rampant-in-nigeria/
[75] https://www.christianheadlines.com/blog/kidnapped-pastor-killed-in-nigeria-after-ransom-payment.html
[76] https://www.persecution.org/2023/11/20/pastor-killed-wife-kidnapped-by-militants-in-nigeria/
[77] https://morningstarnews.org/2023/12/fulani-herdsmen-kill-seven-christians-in-plateau-state-nigeria/
[78] https://www.christianpost.com/news/umc-pastors-held-captive-in-nigeria-despite-church-paying-ransom.html
[79] https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-09/2022%20Violence%20in%20Nigeria%20Policy%20Update.pdf
[80] https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Nigeria_1999

"The enforcement of blasphemy laws constitutes a particularly severe violation of international religious freedom as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). It constitutes the denial of a person's liberty on the basis of their exercising the right to manifest their beliefs through worship, observance, practice, and teaching."

- USCIRF

Given sharia's inherent religious nature, it is problematic when applied to non-Muslims, especially in criminal matters. Under sharia law, blasphemy is a criminal offense with punishments ranging from prison time to the death penalty. **Since the constitution grants sharia courts jurisdiction solely over matters of personal law, the 12 states enforcing blasphemy laws directly violate the constitution.**

A case that received worldwide attention is that of Mubarak Bala, a humanist leader sentenced to 24 years in prison for blasphemy by the Kano State High Court in 2022.[81] Another case of concern is Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, a Sufi Muslim and Nigerian musician facing the death penalty for sharing alleged blasphemous audio messages over WhatsApp.[82]

Blasphemy Case Study - Sheikh Kabara was arrested in July 2021 for "*defamatory sermons*" that allegedly "*mortified the companions and the Holy Prophet Muhammad*." The charges are believed to be connected to the Sheikh's comments made in a public debate on the precepts of Islam. In February 2021, authorities banned the Sheikh from preaching, closed his mosque and the affiliated religious schools. Dissenters of Kabara's charges were prevented from protesting the decision by state security forces. On December 15, 2022, Sheikh Kabara was sentenced to death for blasphemy by an upper sharia court in Kano state. He remains imprisoned today.

Another consequence of blasphemy laws is the reinforcement of mob violence. USCIRF observed on a visit to Nigeria in June 2022 that religious leaders and society at large generally favor punishments for speech that insults someone else's religion.[83] This, in part, is a result of the dangerous legal precedents set by sharia law. This deep-seated contempt for religious minorities has led to widespread unrest "*beyond security forces' capacity to contain*."[84] In May 2022, a Christian college student, Deborah Emmanuel Yakubu, was beaten and burned to death by classmates for allegedly sharing blasphemous speech on social media.[85] Out of the estimated 180 attackers, only 2 students were initially charged with *"conspiracy and inciting public disturbance"* and later released.[8687] In the same month, authorities arrested Rhoda Jatau for alleged blasphemy after she sent text messages responding to Yakubu's death. Mob vigilantes looking to kill Jatau resulted in the death of 11 people and injuries to 28 others.[88]

[81] https://www.uscirf.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/mubarak-bala
[82] https://adfinternational.org/cases/yahaya-sharif-aminu
[83] https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-10/2022%20Nigeria%20Blasphemy%20Policy%20Update.pdf
[84] https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2022-10/2022%20Nigeria%20Blasphemy%20Policy%20Update.pdf
[85] https://www.persecution.org/2022/05/12/female-student-murdered-body-burned-classmates-nigeria/
[86] https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigeria-court-charges-two-students-over-blasphemy-death-2022-05-16
[87] https://theinsight.com.ng/blasphemy-two-suspects-on-trial-for-deborah-samuels-murder-set-free/
[88] https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSLM205771/

*Figure 2 Student yells "*Allahu Akbarm*," and brags about box of matches used to burn the body of Deborah Yakubu*

Under sharia law, there is also evident religious bias seen in the mistreatment and selective restrictions imposed on Christian organizations. Northern state governments prohibit the construction of church buildings and intimidate pastors to prevent them from purchasing land.[89] One church leader who spoke to ICC staff said, "*If you want to build a church, they will not give you a permit because the government will [fire] anyone who signs a document to build a church*." In 2016, officials in Zamfara state demolished St. Stephen's Anglican Church for allegedly being "*an illegal structure.*"[90] In 2021, Borno State officials shot at civilians protesting the demolition of the EYN LCC Moduganari Church. One person was killed, and five church employees were injured.[91]

A Case Study: Du Merci Orphanage - Professor Solomon Tarfa and his wife Mercy founded Du Merci orphanage in Kano state in 1996. For over two decades, the couple rescued abandoned children with the mission "*to glorify God by ministering to orphans and vulnerable children.*" On Christmas Day, 2019, a team of policemen, accompanied by the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons, raided the orphanage without a search warrant. Police arrested Professor Tarfa, closed the orphanage, and transferred 27 children from Du Merci to government-run facilities in Kano and Kaduna states, even though Du Merci was operating with all necessary paperwork in place. Once situated in their new government-run facilities, the Du Merci children were given Muslim Hausa names and taken daily to Muslim prayers and Quranic teachings. The children were not allowed to leave the premises to attend school or church and complained of being mistreated for their religious beliefs.

Professor Tarfa spent almost four years in and out of prison. In February 2023, he was acquitted of all charges. Despite his acquittal, **16 children remain in government custody**, where they have reported serious neglect and abuse. To this day, Kano state refuses to pay reparations for Professor Tarfa's illegal imprisonment, false accusations, and the illegal confiscation of his children.

Figure 3 Noah, 16, a child from Du Merci who received third degree burns in government custody*

[89] https://www.persecution.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/secular_sharia.pdf
[90] https://allafrica.com/stories/201601210677.html
[91] https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/nnorth-east/478126-church-demolition-can-alleges-plot-to-wipe-out-churches-from-borno.html?tztc=1

Finally, sharia law has led to the problem of forced marriage and forced conversion of women and girls. Under sharia, Muslim girls are considered "of age" when married. In Nigeria's northern states, 48% of Muslim girls are married before they turn 15.[92] While child marriage is undoubtedly an issue of human rights, it is also an issue of religious freedom for Nigerian Christians. In cases where a Christian woman or girl is kidnapped, indoctrinated, and forcefully married by her Muslim captors, other Muslims often justify the incident on religious grounds. Northern state governments regularly refuse to protect Christian families from this abuse. In May 2017, a sharia court in Niger State approved the forced marriage and forced Islamic conversion of a 16-year-old Christian girl.[93] In September 2023, a 20-year-old Christian girl was abducted from Kaduna State University and forcibly converted to Islam by school personnel. The University's security officer referred the case to the Kaduna state police commissioner, but to date, nothing has been done.[94] The silence from Nigerian authorities has resulted in Christian parents losing the right to security for their children.

Recommendations to the U.S. Government

The severe religious freedom abuses permitted and perpetuated by the Nigerian government should no longer be tolerated. The United States' failure to hold Nigeria accountable has allowed the government to operate with impunity, emboldening the violence caused by non-state actors and allowing state-level persecution to continue. The United States must address these issues sufficiently and in the best interests of both global human rights and our foreign policy interests. **In addition to the immediate designation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern,** the following measures should also be taken by the U.S. government:

- Boko Haram and IS-WA should remain on the EPC list for engaging in and tolerating severe violations of religious freedom.
- The U.S. should conduct a comprehensive analysis of U.S. aid distribution in the region to ensure maximum effectiveness of aid disbursement. Financial assistance provided by the U.S. to Nigeria must be contingent upon substantial improvements in religious freedom.
- The U.S. should appoint an Ambassador to Nigeria as soon as possible to improve diplomatic relations and to address religious freedom concerns.
- The U.S. should also appoint a special envoy to Nigeria 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 encourage the Nigerian federal government to pursue police reform and strengthen judicial capacity. Restructuring the security sector and bolstering state and

[92] https://atlas.girlsnotbrides.org/map/nigeria/

[93] https://www.christianpost.com/news/16-year-old-daughter-nigerian-church-leader-forced-islamic-marriage-sharia-court.html

[94] https://morningstarnews.org/2023/10/christian-co-ed-kidnapped-forced-to-convert-in-nigeria/

local forces will help provide better regional security. Strict regulations should be set between federal and state authorities to better manage vigilante groups.[95]

- Finally, the U.S. needs to understand and broadcast the true nature of the violence in Nigeria. Diminishing the violence to secondary issues of "farmers-herders conflict" or "climate change" prevents the U.S. from sufficiently addressing the source of the violence. It also significantly undermines the effectiveness of our foreign policy measures, like the CPC designation list.

[95] https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/managing-vigilantism-nigeria-near-term-necessity

TESTIMONY FROM THE FIELD

ICC Staff Visit to Nigeria March 2024

In March 2024, ICC staff visited Nigeria to assess the extent of religious persecution on the ground. Interviews with local communities and leaders affirmed the severity of the situation, telling of thousands of cases where Christians were targeted by extremists solely because of their faith – and the Nigerian government was either unable or unwilling to respond. ICC observed that the reality for Christians on the ground was in desperate need of receiving international attention, and concerted efforts are needed to protect religious freedoms and promote tolerance within the region. Below are just two of the testimonies we gathered.

Sylvie* lost her husband in the 2023 Christmas Eve attacks in Plateau state. In a coordinated attack, Fulani militants targeted 32 villages and killed dozens of men, women, and children. Sylvie said that the attack was planned far in advance, and the government did not to prevent it. She now lives in an IDP camp and struggles to meet basic needs.

Mary* is a widow with five children. Bandits came to Mary's house one night and kidnapped both her and her husband. They were taken to the bush, and her husband was killed. Mary was in captivity for a month and faced beatings daily. Eventually, the kidnappers demanded a ransom of three million Naira ($1,937 USD) for her release. She sold her house and all her possessions to pay the ransom. Although she was released, Mary and her children have nothing. They have no home and no food to eat, and the five siblings cannot afford school.