

**Testimony  
before the  
Subcommittee on Africa  
Of the  
House Foreign Affairs Committee  
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"President Trump's redesignation of Nigeria as a "Country of Particular Concern—CPC"  
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Thank you, Chairman Smith, and Members of this Subcommittee for holding these important hearings. I am honored to be a witness at them.

On October 31, President Trump redesignated Nigeria as a "Country of Particular Concern" for the persecution of Christians by groups of violent Islamists. A White House statement announced that the United States will "stand ready, willing and able" to defend them. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who had urged CPC status for Nigeria, cited specifically the actions of "Fulani ethnic militias."

President Trump made this designation in accordance with the [International Religious Freedom Act \(IRF Act\) of 1998](#). This law requires the president to evaluate annually every foreign country's record on religious freedom and designate as a CPC those with "severe violations of religious freedom," which its government actively "engages in" or "tolerates." "Severe" is defined as "egregious, ongoing and systematic." The law does not address other terms that are frequently used loosely and interchangeably in social discourse, such as "genocide," which American law defines with a high bar, and "persecution," which has no legal definition.

The debate about Nigeria's status regarding whether it should be designated as a CPC began in earnest in Washington last spring. After House African Subcommittee Chairman Chris Smith introduced a resolution that urged CPC designation for Nigeria, as he had also done in 2022, the Subcommittee held a pivotal hearing on the case for Nigeria's CPC designation on March 12, 2025. Thankfully, President Trump listened and acted.

Nigeria's multi-faceted terror problem has devastated northern Muslim and Christian communities alike and is well known. The persecution of Nigeria's Middle Belt Christians by Fulani jihadi militias, however, was long overlooked and finally got Washington's attention when Nigerian Catholic Bishop Wilfred Anagbe testified at the March hearing. The bishop gave startling, first-hand testimony that described frequent raids on the farmlands of his Makurdi diocese by armed Fulani Muslim herders, who kill, rape, or kidnap residents, all the while shouting the jihadi battle cry, "Allahu Akbar." Bishop Anagbe, who is testifying also today, related that these attacks have shut down 20 parishes in his Makurdi diocese. Moreover, Bishop Anagbe said, Nigeria's government was doing nothing to stop this. I was also a witness at the March hearing and agreed that Nigeria should be designated a CPC precisely because the relentless and systematic Fulani attacks targeting Middle Belt Christians are carried out with complete government impunity. By contrast, the government is actively fighting against the terror groups in the north, whose victims include many Muslims. This disparity in the government's policy response to the terror groups and its non-response to the Fulani militias is often missed. In other words, the government is "tolerating" the Fulani militias and that is key to the CPC designation of Nigeria, under the Act.

The Bishop's frank testimony required heroic courage. He soon received death threats. A few weeks later, Fulani militants attacked the bishop's home village of Aondoana and its surrounding area, massacring twelve of his relatives and scores of others. The priest directing his Justice, Development and Peace office, who took the body counts and came to the aid of survivors in such attacks, has been forced to take a temporary leave after credible threats to his life.

Washington's political leaders, such as Chairman Smith and White House officials, were "[appalled](#)" when they learned of this. This attack was part of the brutal pattern the Bishop described in hard-hit Benue and other Middle Belt states. Moreover, it also raised the concern that the attack was in reprisal for his testimony to Congress – one organized not simply by nomadic herders but by those in Nigeria who are close observers of Washington.

Two weeks after the Aondoana incident, Yelewata, a town less than five miles from Benue's state capital of Makurdi, was hit by a Fulani raid. Over 270 Christians were murdered so brutally it move Pope Leo to publicly pray for them in Rome. The victims included some who had been displaced from their hometowns by prior Fulani raids and had sought refuge in Yelewata because it's a military garrison town. The Nigerian troops there did not put up a fight against the couple dozen Fulani attackers who swarmed in on motorcycles and on foot wielding assault rifles and machetes. Other attacks on Benue's Christian villages, including ones earlier this month, have followed. This has been going on for years – again with government impunity.

Similar attacks are relentlessly taking place in Kaduna, Plateau and Taraba and other Middle Belt states, as well as Benue. To give one recent example, a cleric told the outlet TruthNigeria (directed by former State Department official Douglas Burton) that, between November 9 and 11, Fulani militants stormed through Taraba's Wukari Local Government Area, indiscriminately killing 20 people and burning and damaging homes and churches. A survivor, a 33-year-old farmer from Amadu village, told TruthNigeria that, as she prepared to go to early morning Mass a Fulani militia arrived on motorcycles and shot into her house. She is quoted, stating: "They fired for about five minutes, shouting Allahu Akbar. When the gunfire stopped, I went inside and found my husband of 14 years, John Joseph, already dead." A survivor from a neighboring village also related that attackers on motorcycles with AK assault rifles strafed his community. He said, "my neighbors, David Bawa and Titus Gregory, lost five family members between them. My house was riddled with bullets."

TruthNigeria reports on this Taraba attack: "The Fulani militants that attacked are led by warlord Alhaji Tukur, according to [the] community leader." Wakuri diocese called the crisis "overwhelming" and said that 335 Catholic churches have been destroyed and more than 300,000 Catholics there have been displaced, beginning in 2015, [reported TruthNigeria](#). According to the head of a local security consultancy, Fulani militants plan and stage their attacks from an abandoned resort now overgrown with vegetation called Danjuma Farm. The private security consultant further related that the Fulani "use it as a cover for cattle grazing, but that's just a smokescreen," and commented, that if "the government wants to stop the attacks ... they must clear out the terrorists from Danjuma Farms." In a *Daily Post Nigeria* article, a local priest described the situation as "'devastating,' revealing that many rural parishes have been abandoned following sustained assaults that have claimed multiple lives and destroyed entire villages." The Bishop told [ACI Africa](#) last year that if "peace is restored, the region's rich agricultural landscape could provide a 'prosperous future for its residents,'" instead, he said, there is food scarcity because of these constant attacks.

There are countless reports like this across the Middle Belt. I mention this one because it shows that Abuja has failed to act even when the Fulani aggressors are identified and their base from which they launch repeated attacks is known. This represents not only a horrifying pattern of severe persecution by

Fulanis targeting largely Christian areas but also a shocking pattern of government “tolerance” of this persecution.

I’d like to give one last example from Plateau state that occurred a month ago. In Plateau, a pastor with the Church of Christ in Nations told journalists in Jos, on October 24, that Islamic extremists have threatened to murder him for calling on the Nigerian and U.S. governments to help protect Christians against genocide. He told the Christian outlet Morning Star News: “My life is in grave danger. Even as I speak, I am on the lookout for attacks,” he reportedly said. “I no longer sleep with my eyes closed. I have been attacked before but escaped.” The threats came after he appeared in a video on October 15, standing in a mass grave containing the remains of a dozen slain church members, reportedly killed by Fulani herders.

As the Nigeria government issues denials and watches passively -- with no Fulanis prosecuted, with no Nigerian forces prepared to defend the vulnerable -- the Christian death toll from Fulani militia attacks alone (leaving aside attacks by the designated terror groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP) is in the thousands and Christian survivors in displacement camps number in the millions. The respected research group Open Doors cites Nigeria as now the world’s most dangerous country for Christians because of their religion. Again, at this time most Nigerian Christians are being murdered by the Fulani militias and Christians are these militias special target. Aid to the Church in Need reported last month: “Nigerian Christians in the Middle Belt are bearing the brunt of violent attacks” from those identified as “Fulani militants.”

For years the State Department’s Foreign Service and the United Nations have insisted that the violent aggression by Nigeria’s Fulani herders against Christian farmers on their own land is the unavoidable result of climate change. The State Department religious-freedom reports have annually described these indiscriminate mass killings as “clashes” between two socio-economic groups, who fight over scarce resources brought on by climate change. Religion has nothing to do with it, they claimed. This justification of Fulani violence has recently shifted. Now, it is generally acknowledged that Christians are being murdered in cold blood but it is being argued that more Muslims are killed in the violence, and this proves it has nothing to do with religion. This argument is not factual and is irrelevant for CPC. The premise that more Muslims than Christians are killed is debatable, as the scholarly [Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa](#) documents. In any case, most Nigerian Muslims live in the north where Boko Haram and a plethora of ISIS- and al-Qaeda-linked Islamist terror groups attack them and non-Muslims alike and this violence too is religiously based. However, significant for CPC criteria, the Nigerian military is actively fighting those terror groups in the north. By contrast, in the Middle Belt, where most of the Christians are being killed in recent years and where Christians are the special target of Fulani herder militias, the government isn’t lifting a finger against the Fulani militants. Instead, it is “tolerating” these militias and some high level Nigerian officials continue denying that the attacks are taking place. I have also heard about sporadic Christian attacks on Muslim villages. To the extent that the government is not taking action in those cases, that is a further reason for CPC designation.

The Fulani tribe is among West Africa’s largest ethnic groups and its millions of members, most of whom are Muslim, consist of hundreds of clans. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Fulani Islamic scholar Usman dan Fodio established a caliphate in Sokoto with himself as caliph that extended throughout most of northern Nigeria and other areas of West Africa and existed until Nigeria’s British colonization. Today, a portion of the Fulani nomadic herder community are radicalized, well-armed, and carrying out jihad in a loosely organized network against the Middle Belt Christians. Some long for the reestablishment of the Fulani caliphate. They may be influenced by but are distinct from some Fulanis elsewhere in West Africa who have been recruited by various terror groups, including the al Qaeda-linked JNIM and its offshoot, Lakurawa, which wages jihad in Nigeria’s northwest. This is where 25 school girls were kidnapped this

week. Nor should they be conflated, as some scholars have, with those known as “bandits,” Nigeria’s various criminal gangs. The cattle barons in the powerful Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association and similar groups in Nigeria are the Fulani herders’ biggest supporters. The Association’s secretary Ibrahim Galma pushes the narrative internationally that the Fulani are the real victims -- of climate change.

Political momentum to list Nigeria among the world’s worst persecutors gained throughout October as the annual CPC review neared the year-end deadline and reports of massacres kept coming. Celebrity Bill Maher, who is not a Christian, denounced the persecution of Nigerian Christians on an episode of Real Time in late September that went viral.

On October 21, the pontifical foundation Aid to the Church in Need issued its World survey that [reported](#), “The number and ferocity of the attacks on Christian villages [in the Middle Belt] have led some experts to conclude that these incursions are a deliberate land grab to remove Christians and Islamise the region.”

Various high level White House officials and the State Department were also hearing from groups of religious freedom activists on Nigeria. Myself and dozens of other American religious freedom advocates sent an appeal to President Trump specifically asking him to designate Nigeria as a CPC on October 24.

Later that week, President Trump made the CPC designation announcement. For the first time, the issue of the Fulani militias targeting Christians for mass murder received official U.S. acknowledgement. This, in turn, got the attention of Nigeria’s President Tinubu, who said he is willing to work with the U.S. Until now he has not shown the political will to stop this Fulani violence.

The next step after designation in the CPC process requires the President to adopt a policy response. There are several actions the U.S. should immediately take to end the impunity afforded to the Fulani militias attacking Christians.

1. **Disarm Fulani herders.** The Fulani herder militias are loosely organized, don’t have explosives, or drones, don’t use tunnels, suicide vests or propaganda films. They are an unsophisticated but nevertheless lethal force because they come armed with AK-47s and 49s while their targets have only home-made pipe guns with which to defend themselves. Assault rifles, such as those used by the Fulani, are heavily regulated by Nigeria’s Firearms Act, and illegal for the targeted Christian farming villages. [The Firearms Act](#) prohibits “military rifles namely those of calibers 7.62 mm, 9 mm, .300 inches and .303 inches,” and “revolvers and pistols whether rifled or unrifled.” It specifically allows only shotguns, sporting rifles, and muzzle loading air guns, dane-guns (homemade guns), flintlocks, and cap-guns for personal use. The Act, thus, outlaws the firearms that would match the assault-rifle firepower of Fulani militias, and leaves the peaceful Christian communities essentially defenseless. President Tinubu should order the removal of Fulani heavy weapons, raiding their encampments at Danjuma Farm in Taraba, and other places, in the process. He should direct cattle breeders’ associations to cooperate in doing this.
2. **Fortify Target Areas:** U.S. foreign aid to Nigeria has in recent years amounted to about \$1 billion annually to Nigeria. Areas targeted by the Fulani should receive some of this aid to securely return home and reclaim their properties, rebuild and defend themselves. For example, this aid could go toward communication systems, intelligence sharing and the training and equipping of local or private security guards, as well as other measures to strengthen security. The Fulani militias are not the formidable foe seen in ISIS and al Qaeda and their attacks could be prevented and defended against by taking these basic measures.

3. **Humanitarian Aid:** U.S. humanitarian aid and American charity for the victims of Fulani herder militia attacks should be distributed through trusted local providers, including through the churches on the ground that are currently one of the main aid providers to the survivors of Fulani militia attacks. Millions of these survivors are in need of humanitarian assistance for physical and psychological trauma. Formerly productive farmers, they now need food aid since they have been driven from their Middle Belt farms.
4. **Sanction those aiding, abetting and granting impunity to the Fulani herder militias, including high-level officials in the criminal justice system and military:** The U.S. should gather intelligence regarding official responses to the Fulani herder militias and review possible visa and Magnitsky sanctions for those aiding and abetting them and for those officials failing to act to stop their atrocities. The names of Fulani warlords and supporters are known or knowable. Some police, military, legal and other officials who fail to perform their responsibilities and deny justice have been identified and should be investigated for possible U.S. visa and Magnitsky sanctions, as well. Out of all the violent attacks by Fulani herder militias there have been only a few arrests. One involved the prosecution of a Fulani herder who was convicted of destroying melons at a melon company, who received a ten-year prison sentence. Two high-profile legal cases of violent attacks on Christians have seen movement in recent months. One concerns the Catholic Church of St Francis in Ondo where terrorists killed some 40 worshippers on Pentecost Sunday in 2022. Depositions are being taken in that case, Ondo's Bishop recently told me, and the trial hasn't yet started. The five suspects being held are said to be part of the East African Shabaab terror group and not members of a Fulani herder militia. The other case involves the Yelewata massacre from last June, where charges were filed against five Fulani herders in September, in an extremely rare example of prosecution that might be attributable to the pressure raised by the CPC debate in Washington.
5. **Binding agreement with Nigeria to prevent Fulani herder violence & restore stolen Christian farmlands and property:** The IRF Act suggests as a possible policy response to CPC designation a binding agreement between our two countries to stop severe violations of religious freedom. Stopping the Fulani herder militia attacks and atrocities could be done relatively easily since they are not of the caliber of Boko Haram, and the ISIS- and al-Qaeda linked groups. So far, President Tinubu has not demonstrated the political will to direct the police and military action within his power to stop Fulani militias. He argues that because the police force is centralized under the constitution, he is overwhelmed. He says that a constitutional amendment is required to give back policing power to the governors of the states and that could take years. However, right now there exist legal ways President Tinubu can shore up defenses within the targeted Christian areas, for example by letting state governors issue lawful directions to police acting within their states, decentralizing police commands internally, empowering local guards, deploying more mobile police units to states and prioritizing referrals of State governor police orders for presidential review. The U.S. should enter into a binding agreement with Nigeria to ensure needed protection against the Fulani militias and should consider working with state governors who seek American help. Since President Trump's CPC designation, some Nigerian officials, including generals of a force in the southern state of Ondo, citing worries about securing Nigeria's open border, already [asked](#) for U.S. partnership in an effort to "help flush out Fulani Ethnic Militia terrorists from the Southwest."