



**Written Testimony of Tony Perkins
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**Before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa
Hearing on “Conflict and persecution in Nigeria: the case for a CPC designation”
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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Jacobs, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Tony Perkins. I served as a commissioner on the U.S. Committee on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) from 2018 to 2022 and as the chair and vice chair during my last two years on the commission. I am also the president of Family Research Council in Washington, D.C., a Christian nonprofit research and educational organization that tracks international religious freedom concerns, among other issues.

As a former USCIRF chair, I can verify that many Western news outlets, taking their cues from the previous administration, continue to overlook the accelerating violence and bloodshed currently taking place in Africa, which is perpetrated mainly by radical Islamist groups. In Nigeria, Africa’s most populous country, vicious attacks and bloodshed continue to surge, week after week, month after month. Christians are the primary targets of this terrorism, facing murders, rapes, kidnappings, and constant threats.

I would like to share a recent story that illustrates the sometimes-deadly situations Christians in rural Nigeria face.

In the early morning hours of February 9, Fulani terrorists in Gombe state stormed the village of Lubo with AK-49 rifles, shooting sporadically into the air. The terrorists first stopped at the home of the Puma family, where they harassed the head of the household and held a nine-year-old boy ransom before stealing the equivalent of just over 200 USD from the family.

The terrorists asked for directions to Reverend Bala Galadima’s house and then broke in through a window. They demanded money from the reverend, but he pleaded that he had none and offered them grain instead. Rejecting his offer, the terrorists shot him three times, killing him before fleeing the scene.¹

Tragically, such incidents have become all too common in Nigeria. In late January, International Christian Concern reported a rise in attacks by Boko Haram on Christian communities in Chibok, a Local Government Area of Borno state.² This violence has forced more than 4,000 Christians to evacuate from their homes in recent days. In a series of coordinated raids, Boko Haram targeted several Christian villages, setting homes and churches on fire and reportedly killing five people.

Eyewitnesses have stated that Boko Haram specifically targeted Christians during these raids, intimidating them and demanding they convert to Islam or die. The violence has destroyed churches, killed livestock, and obliterated food supplies and livelihoods. Ibrahim Yana, a farmer who fled Shikarkir, said, “We are living in fear. They burned down our church and homes. Many of us have lost everything.”

According to Open Doors, a persecution watchdog group, more Christians are killed for their faith in Nigeria than in any other country. In 2024 alone, 3,100 Christians were killed, and 2,830 were abducted.³

As a USCIRF commissioner, I met with the family of Leah Sharibu and adopted her as a part of the USCIRF prisoner of conscience adoption initiative. Leah was just 14 years old, a typical schoolgirl living in a rural region of Nigeria. That changed on February 19, 2018, when Boko Haram attacked the Government Girls’ Science and Technical College in Dapchi, Yobe State. They kidnapped 109 students but later released all of them except Leah. The girls who were freed said the terrorists kept Leah because she refused to renounce her Christian faith and convert to Islam. Although Leah has not been seen or heard from since, intelligence reports at the end of my tenure indicated that she was still alive.

In early 2024, the Islamic State launched a campaign called “Kill Them Wherever You Find Them,” which lasted from January 1 to January 10. During this time, there was an increase in attacks claimed by Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) on Nigerian territory. On February 3, suspected ISWAP terrorists killed four policemen in the Nganzai Local Government Area of Borno State. A security spokesperson who witnessed the massacre said, “Some of the police officers were also lucky to have survived the onslaught of the terror attack, but the unfortunate four officers paid the supreme price while on active duty.” The terrorists left the area before the Nigerian military arrived.

Another major perpetrator of violence against rural Nigerian Christians is Fulani militants. Some groups of Fulani herdsmen have formed violent Jihadist militias that attack and abduct Christian farmers, often taking their land. In a meeting discussing the Biden administration’s removal of the Country of Particular Concern (CPC) status from Nigeria, former Secretary of State Antony Blinken claimed that these attacks were driven by drought and shrinking pasturelands, causing desperate Fulani migrant herders to encroach upon Christian villages and seize land for their animals amid climate change.

The evidence of rampant bloodshed, outrageous brutality, and Islamist chants and declarations during attacks expose this as a lie.⁴

Let us be clear: this is not a climate issue; it is a religious persecution issue. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, and if we don’t address the religious freedom concerns there, the destabilizing effects could spread to other parts of the continent. This instability would likely increase the number of refugees moving into other parts of Africa and beyond.

During the previous Trump administration, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo designated Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern in December 2020⁵ due to its “particularly severe” violations of

religious freedom. However, in November 2021, the Biden administration abruptly lifted this designation without any explanation,⁶ even as the bloodshed in Nigeria continued to surge.

There are multiple avenues that the Trump administration can take to address the dire religious freedom conditions in Nigeria. I will now highlight a few.

First, the Trump administration should redesignate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern. After the Biden administration removed Nigeria's designation as a CPC, then-Senator Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), along with Senator Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) and others, urged former Secretary of State Antony Blinken to reinstate Nigeria's CPC status.⁷ Now, Secretary of State Rubio should take the opportunity to quickly redesignate Nigeria as a CPC.

The Nigerian government is not off the hook simply because non-state actors are the primary drivers of religious persecution. The government has a duty to protect all its citizens and their basic right to religious freedom, regardless of their faith. Under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), the CPC designation applies to countries where the government is found to have “engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom.”⁸ By failing to adequately address—and indeed making minimal efforts to address—routine and targeted violence against Christians, the Nigerian government certainly qualifies for this designation.

Under IRFA, the U.S. president has the authority to take certain actions, including imposing economic penalties, against countries designated as a CPC. In prior years, most CPC countries have either received waivers or the State Department has pointed out that existing sanctions imposed by the United States meet the criteria for economic penalties. This interpretation is known as “double hatting.” Instead of immediately waiving all possible penalties, the president should utilize his powers under IRFA to impose penalties on Nigeria for its CPC status.

Second, the Trump administration should consider tying Nigeria's religious freedom conditions and protection of Christians to trade agreements or tariffs. President Trump has already used the threat of tariffs to influence the behavior of foreign governments. This situation in Nigeria is serious enough to warrant such measures to get the attention of the Nigerian government, which has been at best apathetic and at worst complicit in the violence perpetrated against Christians in parts of the country.

Third, President Trump should quickly promote a high-profile and effective ambassador at large for international religious freedom. President Trump's previous ambassador in this role was a dynamic figure who successfully elevated the issue of international religious freedom at the State Department and brought momentum to the movement as a whole. Once again, we need an effective ambassador to run point on this issue and give voice to religious freedom concerns that affect U.S. foreign policy.

We are still early into President Trump's second term, and there are many opportunities to make a difference on behalf of persecuted Nigerians. Addressing religious freedom in Nigeria will benefit not only Nigeria but also the United States. Ending violence against Christians and the looming threat of instability in Africa's largest and richest country will ultimately make America safer, stronger, and more prosperous as well.

¹ Mike Odeh James, “Christian Cleric Murdered in Midnight Raid,” *TruthNigeria*, February 12, 2025, <https://truthnigeria.com/2025/02/christian-cleric-murdered-in-midnight-raid/>.

² “Boko Haram’s Latest Attacks Displace Thousands of Christians in Nigeria,” International Christian Concern, January 24, 2025, <https://www.persecution.org/2025/01/24/boko-harams-latest-attacks-displace-thousands-of-christians-in-nigeria/>.

³ Open Doors International, “World Watch List 2025: Nigeria,” report, 2025, <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/nigeria/>.

⁴ Lela Gilbert, “The Crisis of Christian Persecution in Nigeria,” Family Research Council, issues analysis, February 2021, <https://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF20G16.pdf>.

⁵ Laura Kelly, “Nigeria joins State Dept list of violators of religious freedom,” *The Hill*, December 7, 2020, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/529121-nigeria-joins-state-dept-list-of-violators-of-religious-freedom/>.

⁶ Lela Gilbert, “A Shocking Reversal: The US Officially Turns a Blind Eye to Nigeria’s Endangered Christians,” *Providence*, November 23, 2021, <https://providencemag.com/2021/11/shocking-reversal-us-turns-blind-eye-nigeria-christians-country-particular-concern-religious-freedom-joe-biden/>.

⁷ Office of Senator Josh Hawley, “Hawley Leads Letter Demanding Blinken Reinstate Nigeria to Religious Freedom ‘Concern’ List For Violence Against Christians,” press release, June 29, 2022, <https://www.hawley.senate.gov/hawley-leads-letter-demanding-blinken-reinstate-nigeria-religious-freedom-concern-list-violence/>.

⁸ *International Religious Freedom Act of 1998*, 22 U.S.C. §6442, available online at <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title22/chapter73&edition=prelim>.