

Statement before the U.S. Congress Lantos Human Rights Commission
“Conflict and Killings in Nigeria’s Middle Belt”
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- Thank you for inviting me to speak today. This is an important topic — we have growing concerns about the ways in which violence in Nigeria intersects with religion.
- 2020 has seen rising violence in many parts of West Africa, including Nigeria. Religiously motivated human rights abuses and discrimination—while fortunately not as common as in other areas of the world—have been rising in recent years.
- Violence has unfolded across rural Nigeria. Unfortunately, violence often plays out along faith lines, even if conflicts were not originally religious, both because of the composition of farmer and herder groups and because of the history of ethno-religious tensions, exacerbated by lack of accountability.
- While the Nigerian government has deployed security forces to troubled areas, they have been unable to stop the violence, and improvements are needed in security responses to ensure the protection and promotion of human rights. Violence prevention also requires a whole of community approach, of which security responses are only one part.
- During his annual review of the state of religious freedom in all countries, as required by our law, Secretary Pompeo determined that Nigeria has “engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom,” and therefore moved Nigeria from the “Special Watch List,” where it had been placed last year, to the “Country of Particular Concern” list.
- We strongly condemn violence in Nigeria aimed at communities because of their faith – whether those communities are Muslim or Christian, including through attacks targeting religious gatherings. To end these cycles of violence, the Nigerian government must hold to account individuals who perpetrate such unlawful violence and human rights abuses. Failure to do contributes to an environment of escalation and dangerous volatility.
- Conflicts between herdsmen and farmers in the North Central region continued throughout the year, although violence has fallen somewhat since the peak in 2018. While these groups are predominantly Muslim and Christian, there are both herdsmen and farmers from both faiths.
- In the past year, religious groups and NGOs have expressed concerns that this conflict has taken on increasingly religious undertones. Hundreds of civilians of both faiths died as a result of the violence, and there were several cases of inter-

communal violence during which places of worship were burned and religious ceremonies attacked.

- Unfortunately, both federal and state authorities in the country are weak. Certain state governments are strongly biased against Muslims, who are perceived as outsiders.
- On the other hand, we have heard repeatedly from religious community representatives who see religious freedom in Nigeria deteriorating, including what they assess as an increasing threat of “mass atrocities”. Local and international NGOs and religious organizations criticize the government’s seeming inability to prevent or mitigate violence between Christian and Muslim communities.
- For example, in late November, we observed attacks between Christians and Muslims in Kaduna State that displaced a Fulani village, destroyed farm equipment and food stocks, and further strained livelihoods in these communities. The Kaduna State governor authorized state relief services to aid affected villages and directed state authorities to hold conflict and reconciliation talks with the aggrieved communities. However, retaliatory attacks occurred between the communities, demonstrating that the government is unable to prevent conflict from recurring.
- There have been attacks specifically targeted towards houses of worship in the Middle Belt, including March attacks in southern Kaduna where four churches were burned, an April attack in Niger that killed twelve people and abducted the couple. (Source: USCIRF Nigeria Country Update).
- Forceful conversion of Christian women is happening in some intercommunal abductions, and the federal government has no policy to deal with the issue. The government readily admits that it has struggled to address the increase in kidnapping cases over the past five years.
- We also have heard that while studies and commissions of inquiry are conducted in Nigeria, the government does not follow through to address the issues.
- This is an important point – governments cannot only react to violent incidents, they must enact and implement policies to prevent future conflict, create the foundations for peaceful and lasting resolutions, and promote respect for human rights and justice for all. And when they do react to violence, they must order thorough and legitimate investigations of attacks, and follow through on prosecution of the perpetrators. Otherwise, impunity will continue for attackers and victims will be left without justice.
- Lack of information about perpetrators of attacks also leads to unhelpful stereotypes. Violence has been attributed to Fulani groups, though most Fulani are peaceful and even among those who are not peaceful, there is a wide range of groups and interests in this broad and diverse population. -

- Yet this region has had a very long tradition of hospitality, tolerance, and pluralism—which is a tremendous cultural asset.
- Throughout Nigeria, religion and religious identity form the core of personal identity. Religious leaders, as part of a robust civil society, can ease the tensions that drive communal violence and violent extremism, and they can also be a positive voice for good governance.
- Faith institutions and religious leaders, working with government and other civil society groups, all have very important roles to play in increasing dialogue and understanding. Faith communities themselves also play a critical role.
- Along with civil society, the Nigerian government, at the federal, state, and local level, must be a part of the solution. We are mindful of its capacity to effect change, and to strengthen protections of religious freedom and ensure security for all, regardless of faith — it is a challenge affecting the next generation.
- Leadership from the Nigerian government—and from the international community—to support moderated dialogue among local communities on issues of social discrimination, religious freedom, access to justice, and natural resource management can help build broad national consensus on how best to confront the challenges to peace in pluralistic societies.
- I look forward to your questions and to our continued collaboration towards these goals. Thank you.