

## STATEMENT TO THE HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE ON THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

By Bishop Matthew Hassan KUKAH, Catholic Diocese of Sokoto, Nigeria, on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
in Washington DC.

1: From its inception as an independent nation, Nigeria has remained a volatile country. Home to almost two hundred million people communicating in over five hundred tongues, Nigeria remains one of the most enigmatic pieces of God's real estate on earth. Running, stumbling but never fatally falling except for a brief civil war, she is home to one out of five black people on earth. Highly resourced, but endemically corrupt, a combination of serious governance missteps, series of military coups, years of maladministration, a culture of violence have seriously slowed down what should have been one of the greatest nations on earth. It has left its people vulnerable to poverty, disease, violence and death.

2: Today, for the purpose of my testimony, the focus is on the Christian faith and even within Christianity, I speak for the Catholic Church in Nigeria. I believe there will be many voices and perspectives on the issues, but very little disagreement on the debris of human suffering and pain inflicted on the citizens of our country through the abuse of God's name. We are all too familiar with the stories of the tragedies across the world by misguided and evil men and women who are determined to destroy the foundations of our common existence using religion. I will briefly sketch the experiences of the Christian community in the Nigeria with this tragic culture of death.

3: This audience is already has deep knowledge of the key issues, the politics, the drivers and the financiers of terrorism on a global scale. Nigeria's experience derives from the experience of the larger global community. Persecution of Christians in Nigeria has occurred at different levels with almost the same pattern, sometime subtle, often out rightly violent and destructive. A few examples.

### 3: 1: Christians Martyrs in the face of violent Persecution:

There have been dastardly actions target directly at Christians because of their faith. We have cases of Pastoral agents such as Priests and Nuns who have been kidnapped, released after the payment of ransom or brutally murdered. I will cite only three examples even though there are many more cases across denominations.

In 2018, two Priests, **Frs. Joseph Gor** and **Felix Tyolaha** were murdered along with 17 of their Parishioners while celebrating Mass at their local Church when gunmen stormed the Church in the Diocese of Makurdi, Benue State. In January 2018, **four Seminarians** were kidnapped inside the Good Shepherd Major Seminary Kaduna. After prolonged negotiations and the payment of ransom, three of them were released while one, **Michael Nnadi** from the Diocese of Sokoto was brutally murdered.

In March 2020, a detachment of Policemen came into the Seminary to report that they had captured Michael's murderers. They confessed their crime and also gave insight into why they killed Michael. They said that in the course of their captivity, Michael kept preaching and asking them to repent of their evil acts and turn towards God. *We were*, said one of his captors, *angered by the fact that he was persistent in his appeal to us to repent despite*

*knowing that we were Muslims!* Along with Michael in the same camp had been one **Mrs. Bolanle Ataga**, a married woman and mother of two daughters who had been captured also with her children. After payment of ransom, only her two daughters were released. Two weeks later, her husband concluded negotiations for her return. However, on the day of her release, one of her captors said that the only condition for her release would be for her to sleep with the leader of the murderous gang. According to the witness, she told their leader that he could only sleep with her dead body! He immediately ordered her murder.

In October 2019, two Pastors with the Church of Christ in Nigeria, COCIN, **Rev. Joseph Duna Dacighir** and **Godfrey Ali Shikagham** were murdered by their captors for their Christian faith. In January 2020, the Chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria, CAN, Michika Local Government of Adamawa State was murdered by ISIS. The list is very long but these incidents are indicative of the faith of hundreds of believers.

Beyond the physical elimination of Christian missionary Pastoral agents, other strategies adopted in the persecution of Christians are, the total or partial destruction of Church related infrastructure such as Churches, Schools, Convents, Health facilities, and Presbyteries across the country. In some Dioceses in the North East, priests have had to leave their Parishes after they had been destroyed and the community sacked.

There are also cases of abduction of Christian girls, turning them into sex slaves, forcing them into marriages and forced conversions to Islam. In some cases, these girls and boys have been forced to become spies, cooks, messengers, foot soldiers for their captors. The scope of persecution is wide and cross cutting. Again, as I have said earlier, these stories are known to most of the audience. Perhaps what is most important is for me to speak to what kind of short, medium and long term solutions should we be contemplating. No one has the answers, but we must continue to prepare for a life after this tragedy.

For us at the Catholic Bishops Conference, we have remained relentless and consistent in speaking prophetic truth to power. We have done this through many Communiqués and Statements calling attention of government to the tragedies afflicting our people and the nation's slide to chaos. Second, we have two key platforms for immediate and short term responses to crisis in our country, namely, the Justice Peace and Development Commission, JDPC and Caritas. Both work closely and have offices across all the 56 Dioceses of Nigeria. They offer relief whenever incidents happen in their communities. We also offer pastoral support for our people in the camps of the Internally Displaced Persons, IDP.

We continue to engage the federal and state governments, seeking collaboration on all fronts. Education is on the concurrent list of items on our Constitution and this means that each state acts independently. In cases where we have Christian minorities, Christian children in public schools have no access to the teachings of the faiths. We have just discovered that even within the Deradicalisation and Rehabilitation Programme for so called repentant terrorists, the teaching of Christian Religious Knowledge is not included.

Amidst the pandemic, the Catholic Bishops offered the federal government a total of 456 Health facilities across the country in case the Covid-19 pandemic proved overwhelming and overstretches the lean resources of both federal and state governments. Frustrated by the

endless bloodletting, the Catholic Bishops in March, 2020 took to the streets to call the attention of the federal government to end the killings across the country.

By way of conclusion, let me make a few appeals. First, to the international community. The persecution of Christians based solely on their faith and not on any crimes they have committed poses one of the greatest threats to our existence and common humanity. Christians make up over one third of the world's population and have laid the foundation for human civilisation. It is in the interest of our collective survival that we rise in defense of the freedom of Christians everywhere in the world to live and practice their faiths.

We commend those who continue to work in the area of protecting religious freedom even in the face of personal danger and risk to their own lives. This is a battle that we must win because without faith, we will return to the Hobbesian state of nature with its nastiness, brutishness and death. Thus, the organisers of this Conference deserve our commendation for putting this issue under the spot light. We appreciate the great work of organisations like Aid to the Church in Need whose work has helped to rebuild our Churches and supported the formation of new pastoral agents. The Government of Hungary deserve our appreciation for their interventions in the area of Education and Health for our people.

Terrorism requires weak, corrupt and ineffective government structures to thrive, survive and even bloom. The international community must continue to support Democracy and help poorer nations to abide by its principles. Despite its problems, for now, Democracy is the best tool for managing diversity and reversing the slide to perdition in many societies such as ours in Nigeria.

International Aid Organisations must reset the donor templates of their engagement with countries that are in conflict. There needs to be a change in how these Agencies see Religious groups. It is important that a threshold of expertise, competence and proficiency be set for accessing Aid. The faith communities are closest to the people and, in our case, everyone knows what the Catholic Church has done over time. The most critical needs of our people now are Education of orphans and vulnerable children from this violence. Rebuilding of the lives of our communities of our people remains paramount. This requires huge financing but often, the needs of our people are modest. My appeal therefore is that Aid Agencies consider more practical ways of engaging Church structures to alleviate the sufferings of the victims of persecution by way of granting scholarships, learning tools to children in destroyed our communities. In this way, we have a better chance of speaking in practical terms about reconciliation, reconstruction and the future of our countries.

It is important to restate even though the purveyors of terrorism, banditry, kidnapping and murders of our people continue to appeal to Islam as their source of inspiration, what we are dealing with is the Jihadist/Salafist supremacist strain of the faith that is at best a cancer that threatens the Muslim world itself. We must name the devil so as to cast it out. This means that first, a majority of those who are good Muslims must rise in defense of their religion by reversing this inhuman view of religion which pretends to be working in the name of the religion. So, the problem is not with Islam but the Salafist views perpetrated by those who insist on using violence to perpetrate their evil deeds.

In Nigeria, the Muslim elite have been at their hypocritical best, using religion as a tool for political mobilisation. In 1999, the Northern elite adopted Sharia law and yet today, all the states are today a horrible crime scene accounting for over 80 of all the death and destruction that has occurred in the country. This is why, when politicians use Religion for political and economic self-interest, they weaken their moral authority to call these evil men to order.

For us as Christians, this gathering is welcome in a time when the holy father, Pope Francis has called for social friendships around the world. In his words: *“Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all”*