



## Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

### Conflict and Killings in Nigeria's Middle Belt

Thursday, December 17, 2020

1:00 – 5:00 PM

2172 Rayburn House Office Building and Virtual via Cisco WebEx

### **Opening Remarks by Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ), Co-Chairman**

(Excerpt of Remarks)

Today's hearing will come to order.

I would like to thank our witnesses, for sharing their expertise and views in what I think is a very important and timely hearing, following a week in which the State Department designated Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) and the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Fatou Bensouda, announced that a well-founded basis exists for [investigating Nigeria](#) for crimes against humanity and war crimes – including investigating both terror organizations such as Boko Haram and the Nigerian security forces.

I also note the focus that both the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission has had over the years with numerous hearings and briefings on Nigeria, and that I myself have had in my past capacity as Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa.

The United States and the international community must do more to mitigate the violence because the dire situation on the ground warrants it and because the people of Nigeria deserve to live in peace and freedom with their fundamental human rights guaranteed and because Nigeria is the largest country in Africa and what happens there has an outsized impact in West Africa and in Africa as a whole.

Nigeria is so large – its population is forecast by some to reach over 400 million people by 2050, overtaking the United States as the world's third most populous country – and its economic and political leadership in sub-Saharan Africa so impactful, that we cannot ignore it. A stable and prosperous Nigeria contributes to stable and prosperous neighbors. Conversely, an unstable Nigeria wracked by poverty and violence does not contribute to well-being of its neighbors, but rather can lead to their destabilization in turn.

I chaired a hearing on Nigeria almost two years ago to the day, noting that Nigeria was at a crossroads at that time. Today, we see escalating violence along ethnic and religious lines, exacerbated by economic, social and political tensions.

Among the seven Nigerian hearings that I previously chaired were a series of landmark hearings with respect to the designation of Boko Haram as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, or FTO, along with a bill which I had introduced, [H.R. 3209](#). While it may sound surprising to some today, for the historical record it must be stated that the designation of Boko Haram was strenuously opposed by the State Department at the time, led by then Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Assistant Secretary for Africa [Johnnie Carson](#).

At [my hearing on July 10, 2012](#), for example, I asked Secretary Carson why the Obama Administration refused to designate Boko Haram a FTO and he said: “It’s an important question... We have indeed designated three individuals who we think are in top leadership positions to that list. But we have not designated the entire organization because we do not believe that Boko Haram is a homogenous organization... We believe that the larger element of Boko Haram is not interested in doing anything but attempting to discredit, disgrace the Nigerian Government.”

The refusal to designate Boko Haram a FTO went on for about three years.

This, however, changed, when John Kerry became Secretary of State and Linda Thomas-Greenfield became Assistant Secretary for Africa. In fact it was at a November 2013 hearing I chaired that [Linda Thomas-Greenfield](#) publicly announced that Boko Haram would be designated an FTO.

So today there is widespread recognition that Boko Haram, along with its breakaway – and perhaps now more powerful – faction, Islamic State West Africa, is clearly a terror threat.

But today’s hearing will address a related but not as clearly understood phenomenon, which is the violence, mass killings and atrocities in the Middle Belt of Nigeria that is corollary to the violence perpetrated by Boko Haram and the like. These acts of horrific violence, which we hear testimony about, are committed in large part by Fulani militants.

And I want to underscore that it is important that we do name those responsible for the violence, and its ethno-religious component, because there has been a lot of moral equivocation on this point, including by our State Department.

Yes, the situation has some degree of complexity. Yes, there are tensions between farmers and pastoralists exacerbated by climate change. Yes, there are counter-reprisals committed against members of the Fulani community, including those who are innocent of any wrongdoing.

But that does not negate the fact that the largest, dominant driver of conflict in the Middle Belt region is committed by Fulani extremists, who appear driven in large part by ethno-religious chauvinism, against mostly Christian farmers – though I do note that elsewhere Shia Muslims are also victims, and that intra-Sunni conflicts also exist within the Muslim community as well.

Nigerian Bishop William Avenya will testify today that “the mass slaughter of Christians in Nigeria’s Middle Belt, by every standard meets the criteria for a calculated genocide from the definition of the Genocide Convention” yet he notes that “no one has ever been arrested or questioned or prosecuted or convicted of any charge related to this spree of killings...”

In its November 18th, [2020 Report to the International Criminal Court the Jubilee Campaign](#) writes: “Violence that has taken place in Nigeria’s Middle Belt is spiraling out of control, costing the lives of thousands of civilian and destabilizing the country and region. The violence is often characterized as an “inter-communal conflict” between herders and farmers over natural resources. However, the well-worn label is now obsolete due to the increasing asymmetry in attacks, as well as the steadily increasing frequency and organizational planning of Fulani militant attacks against civilian targets.”

What separates this situation from that of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa, however, is the fact that the Nigerian government under President Muhammadu Buhari, is dominated by Fulani.

This is true of the military and the State Security forces, but increasingly other institutions of power, including the Supreme Court of Nigeria, where Buhari engineered the ouster of Chief Justice Walter Onnoghen. We have also seen the side-lining of members of the Fulani community who have demonstrated a commitment to peace, including the ouster of the Emir of Kano in March of this year, at a time when the COVID epidemic was becoming the focus of attention.

While there is now consensus that Boko Haram is engaged in terrorism, that consensus breaks down when the issue of Fulani extremism comes up, a topic I hope we will explore today and gain a better understanding of.

I am also very concerned about the apparent inability – or perhaps even reluctance – of the Nigerian federal government under President Buhari to put a stop to violence in the Middle Belt or even, at times, to unequivocally condemn the attacks.

As I have said before, it is critically important that Fulani political leaders such as President Buhari, Fulani religious leaders such as the Sultan of Sokoto, and Fulani institutions such as the cattleman’s association Miyetti Allah – all of whom have authority and influence among the Fulani militants – unequivocally condemn these attacks and use their power and influence to promote peace and reconciliation.

Moreover, it is not sufficient that such condemnations be issued in English. Rather, they must clearly and repeatedly be articulated in Hausa and Fulfulde.

And more than just words – President Buhari must act.

Thank you, and I look forward to a meaningful and hopefully impactful discussion.