

**AMENDMENT IN THE NATURE OF A SUBSTITUTE
TO H. RES. 82
OFFERED BY MR. SMITH OF NEW JERSEY**

Strike the preamble and insert the following:

Whereas, in 2020, the Department of State designated Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (22 U.S.C. 6401 et seq.), finding that it is “engaging in or tolerating” “systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom”;

Whereas, in 2021, 2022, and 2023, the Department of State did not designate Nigeria as a CPC, despite the strong recommendations to do so by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF);

Whereas, in June 2022, a USCIRF delegation visited Nigeria to assess the religious freedom conditions and confirmed that “[r]eligious minorities and individuals with dissenting beliefs face particular challenges in exercising their rights” because of threats of mob violence, detention, and prosecution by state authorities, and also noted the role of violence by nonstate actors impacting worship for both Muslims and Christians;

Whereas, in September 2022, USCIRF held a virtual hearing on religious freedom, the drivers of violence, and United States policy in Nigeria and concluded that the “State Department should designate Nigeria as a country of particular concern for engaging and tolerating systematic

ongoing egregious religious freedom violations . . . and to appoint a special envoy”;

Whereas, on December 14, 2023, USCIRF stated it was “alarmed by the amount of violence and attacks taking place throughout Nigeria in the north and south in recent months. This momentum is not stopping, and we cannot stand by and watch more Nigerians being targeted on the basis of their faith, especially as we near the holiday season where we have seen this escalation in the past”;

Whereas, on and around December 24, 2023, Christmas Eve, about 300 Christians were killed or died subsequently from targeted attacks and none of these perpetrators in Nigeria’s Plateau State have been held to account;

Whereas USCIRF finds that “in Nigeria’s Middle Belt, nonstate armed groups also conducted attacks on houses of worship, religious ceremonies, and religious leaders, with Christian communities and their churches hit particularly hard” and that “the Nigerian Government has often failed to respond sufficiently to violence against religious leaders and congregations”;

Whereas, in January 2023, Open Doors reported in Nigeria there were “5,014 Christians killed in 2022, nearly 90 percent of the total number of Christians killed worldwide . . . [and] almost 90 percent of kidnappings carried out against Christians in 2022”;

Whereas the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa found that, from October 2019 to September 2022, Christians were 7.6 times more likely to be killed and 6 times more likely to be abducted than Muslims by ter-

rorist and militia groups in Nigeria when taking into account their proportional populations in Nigeria's states;

Whereas the Constitution of Nigeria protects freedom of religion and provides that “[t]he Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion”;

Whereas the Nigerian Government has failed to address allegations of institutional bias and preferential treatment for particular ethnic and religious groups, to the detriment of others and in contradiction to the Nigerian Constitution's prohibition on discrimination on the grounds of religion;

Whereas Aid to the Church in Need reports that in 2022 alone, 100 Nigerian Catholic priests and religious sisters were kidnapped, 17 of whom were murdered, with many of these attacks occurring on church grounds;

Whereas northern Nigeria has seen the destruction of “over 17,000 churches since 2009” in attacks by Boko Haram militants, armed assailants, and others, according to a 2020 Vatican report of its interview of a Nigerian Catholic civil rights expert;

Whereas, for over a decade, Islamic terror organizations have carried out mass murder, rape, kidnappings, and other atrocities on Nigerians of various ethnic and religious backgrounds, causing suffering and displacement, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that this has resulted in about 3,500,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in northeastern Nigeria and 342,717 registered refugee Nigerians in the neighboring regions;

Whereas terrorist group Boko Haram kidnapped over 200 mostly Christian schoolgirls in 2014 in Chibok, Borno State; 100 remain captive and are sexually abused and pressured to convert to Islam, and Leah Sharibu, a Christian, remains captive and enslaved following a terrorist raid of her school, in Dapchi, Yobe State, in 2018;

Whereas, on June 5, 2022, for the first time in southern Nigeria, a church was attacked during a Pentecost Sunday Mass, when terrorists massacred 40 worshippers and wounded scores more in a shooting attack on St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Owo City, in Ondo State, and none of the suspects have been convicted and sentenced;

Whereas USCIRF reports that “[i]n northcentral Nigeria, ethnonationalists fighting to promote Fulani interests target Christian civilians based on ethnoreligious identity and are among the armed actors that attack worshippers in their military pursuits there and elsewhere in northern Nigeria”, and that “[k]idnappers also reportedly deliberately targeted Christians for abduction and execution”;

Whereas USCIRF concludes that the Nigerian Government has “routinely failed to investigate these attacks [on Christian communities] and prosecute those responsible, demonstrating a problematic level of apathy on the part of state officials”;

Whereas, on December 7, 2020, the House of Representatives passed a resolution calling for the repeal of blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy laws worldwide, and the unconditional release of people prosecuted, imprisoned, and persecuted based on such charges;

Whereas USCIRF cites Nigeria’s blasphemy laws among the reasons it lists Nigeria as warranting CPC designation,

given that Nigeria is 1 of only 7 countries with criminal blasphemy laws that carry the death penalty, with such laws existing in the 12 majority-Muslim northern Nigerian States, and that these laws contribute to mob violence against religious minorities;

Whereas, in 2020, Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, a Sufi musician, was convicted of blasphemy after sharing lyrics on WhatsApp and sentenced to death without legal representation in Kano; Muslim cleric, Sheikh Abduljabar Nasiru Kabara is now on death row for blasphemy in Kano; and Nigeria's former President of the Nigerian Humanist Association, who was formerly a Muslim, Mubarak Bala received a 24-year sentence for blasphemy-related charges in 2022; and

Whereas, on May 12, 2022, Deborah Yakubu, a Christian student, was beaten to death by a mob on her school's campus in Sokoto for alleged blasphemy against Islam on WhatsApp, and only 2 suspects were arrested on minor charges, and have since been released for failure to prosecute; for criticizing Yakubu's murder, the Sultan of Sokoto and Sokoto's Catholic Bishop Matthew Kukah faced serious death threats from others who acted with impunity; and Christian woman Rhoda Jatau has faced prosecution since May 20, 2022, on blasphemy-related charges for allegedly sharing a video on WhatsApp created by another individual that condemned the lynching of Yakubu: Now, therefore, be it

Strike all after the enacting clause and insert the following:

That—

1 (1) the Secretary of State should immediately
2 designate Nigeria a “country of particular concern”
3 for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing,
4 and egregious violations of religious freedom, as
5 mandated by the International Religious Freedom
6 Act of 1998 (22 U.S.C. 6401 et seq.);

7 (2) the Secretary of State should publicly call
8 for the immediate release of all individuals charged
9 with or convicted of blasphemy-related charges in
10 Nigeria and devote all necessary resources to secure
11 their release and ensure their safety and that of
12 their families.

(As Amended)