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(Original Signature of Member)

118TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

H. RES.

Expressing the sense of Congress regarding the need to designate Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, the need to appoint a Special Envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, and for other purposes.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey submitted the following resolution; which was referred to the Committee on _____

RESOLUTION

Expressing the sense of Congress regarding the need to designate Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, the need to appoint a Special Envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, and for other purposes.

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 and 2022, the Department of State omitted Nigeria from its CPC list;

Whereas, in 2022, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommended that the Department of State redesignate Nigeria as a CPC and found the Department of State’s decision to delist Nigeria “inexplicable”, and a result of “turning a blind eye” to that country’s “particularly severe religious freedom violations”;

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 according to some experts, the northern-based Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association, a Fulani herdsman advocacy group, supports reestablishing a Fulani empire, modeled upon the caliphate in northern Nigeria established by Usman dan Fodio, in the early 19th century;

Whereas Nigeria is an ethnically and religiously diverse federal state, and traditionally political power has been bal-

anced between Muslims and Christians, Northerners and Southerners, and among Nigeria's 371 different ethnic groups;

Whereas President Muhammadu Buhari has favored and promoted fellow Fulani and other northern Muslim ethnic groups, while many of Nigeria's diverse ethnic and religious groups, including Igbo and Yoruba as well as Christians and Shia Muslims, report they are denied equal rights;

Whereas, on July 13, 2021, in testimony at a congressional hearing before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission by Bishop Matthew Kukah of Sokoto, representing the Catholic Church in Nigeria, stated that the "Muslim elite" "us[es] religion as a tool for political mobilisation", and further stated that President Buhari shows a clear preference for appointing "men and women of his faith";

Whereas departures from past conventions aimed at achieving ethnic, religious, and geographic balance include the forced replacement of then-Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Walter Onnoghen with a Muslim jurist, and the selection of Muslims as leaders of both houses of the national legislature;

Whereas President Buhari's party, the All Progressives Congress, in a departure from customary practice, nominated two Muslims to its 2023 Presidential ticket, selecting as vice presidential candidate Kashim Shettima, whose past tenure as governor of Borno State was criticized for failing to adequately address jihadi violence perpetrated by Boko Haram;

Whereas the Aid to the Church in Need reports that, since early 2022 alone, 20 Nigerian Catholic priests have been

kidnapped, 5 of whom were murdered, with many of these attacks occurring on church grounds;

Whereas, on January 11, 2023, Bishop Lucius Iwejuru Ugorji, president of the Nigerian Catholic Bishops' Conference, and four other bishops on the conference's administrative board met with President Buhari to appeal for civil protections in Nigeria, stating, “[o]ur Church personnel have been frequent victims in terms of kidnapping or outright murder”;

Whereas the Methodist Church reported on May 29, 2022, that eight Fulani militants abducted and tortured its head, Prelate Samuel Kanu-Uche, a chaplain, and Bishop Dennis Mark of Owerri, who were released after paying a \$240,000 ransom, while the militants warned, “We will finish you people and take over this land”, according to Bishop Kanu, who added, “They claimed that Nigeria belonged to Fulani”;

Whereas imams were also abducted in 2022, according to Nigerian media reports, with the chief imam of Masama-Mudi village, Zamfara, being abducted from his mosque on December 29, 2022, by unknown assailants, and an imam being abducted in Zugu, Zamfara state, in a mosque attack on September 2, 2022, reportedly by “terrorists”;

Whereas in northern and central Nigeria, near-weekly, violent assaults on churches and their congregations are reportedly carried out by designated terror groups, Fulani militants and other nonstate actors, who act with impunity;

Whereas northern Nigeria has seen the destruction of “over 17,000 churches since 2009” in attacks by Boko Haram militants, Fulani herdsmen, and others, according to a

2020 Vatican report of its interview of a Nigerian Catholic civil rights expert, and in 2021, the Department of State reported five attacks on mosques by unidentified gunmen, bandits, and Boko Haram;

Whereas, for over a decade, terrorist organizations have carried out mass murder, rape, kidnappings, and other atrocities on Nigerians of various ethnic and religious backgrounds, causing unspeakable suffering and displacement, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that this has resulted in over 3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in northeastern Nigeria, and 343,000 registered refugee Nigerians in the Lake Chad region;

Whereas terrorist group Boko Haram, whose name means “Western education is forbidden”, 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 the British All Party Parliament Group (APPG) report of 2020 finds that some Fulani herders “demonstrated a clear intent to target Christians and symbols of Christian identity such as churches”, and, during attacks, shouted “Allah u Akbar”, “destroy the infidels”, and “wipe out the infidels”, and on January 15, 2023, assailants reportedly attacked New Life for All Church in Katsina, shooting and wounding the pastor and kidnapping up to 25 in the congregation, including 5 women and girls;

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 the Department of State mischaracterizes or incompletely characterizes the increasing incidents of large scale violence in Nigeria's northern and central rural regions as "communal clashes" between Muslim herders and Christian farmers, solely attributable to competition for scarce natural resources resulting from climate change;

Whereas USCIRF reports that "Fulani-affiliated armed groups used religious rhetoric while conducting myriad attacks on predominantly Christian villages in Kaduna State", 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 the UNHCR reports that there are over 2.1 million IDPs in northeastern Nigeria, and 304,562 registered refugee Nigerians in the Lake Chad region;

Whereas USCIRF cites Nigeria's Islamic blasphemy laws among the reasons it lists Nigeria as worthy of CPC designation, given that Nigeria is one 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;

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 clerics, Abdul and Sheikh Abduljabbar Nasiru-Kabara, are now on death row for blasphemy in Kano; and Nigeria’s Humanist Association and former Muslim Mubarak Bala received a 24-year sentence for apostasy 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, only two suspects were arrested on minor charges, and 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: Now, therefore, be it

1 *Resolved*, That—

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

8 (2) in order to ensure that the Secretary of
9 State receives more complete and accurate reporting
10 and analysis, the President should promptly appoint
11 a person of recognized distinction in the fields of re-
12 ligious freedom and human rights as “Special Envoy
13 for Nigeria and the Lake Chad Region” with the

1 rank of Ambassador, who reports directly to the Sec-
2 retary of State and coordinates United States Gov-
3 ernment efforts to monitor and combat atrocities
4 there.