

POLICY BRIEF



Nigeria

Addressing the violence against Christian communities

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and a major political and economic force in West Africa and the continent at large. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria recognizes a wide range of fundamental rights – such as the right to life, right to human dignity and right to freedom of conscience and religion – to which Nigeria is internationally committed to respect.¹

Religion plays a key role in the Nigerian society: the two major religions are Christianity and Islam, representing 46.3% and 46.2% of the population respectively. An increasing level of insecurity, violence and impunity that plays along religious and ethnic lines is fostering severe violations of fundamental rights, especially with the expansion of terrorist groups like Boko Haram/ISWAP in the northeast, violence and abductions by armed

bandits in the northwest, and the increasing violence in the Middle Belt at the hands of Fulani militants. Violence has also been spreading to the south of the country; there are reports about violence by Fulani militants in the Southwest and even in the Southeast of Nigeria.²

In December 2020 the US Government designated Nigeria as Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for engaging in or tolerating “systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom”.³

The scale of the problem

The extent and impact of this violence is appalling: more

¹ Chapter IV, Art. 33-46, *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*, available at: <http://ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/54097/71263/F728467428/NGA54097.pdf>.

² “Nigeria: Country Dossier”, *World Watch Research*, March 2021, pp. 18-21. Available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Nigeria-WWR-Full-Country-Dossier-March-2021.pdf>.

³ <https://thehill.com/policy/international/529121-nigeria-joins-state-dept-list-of-violators-of-religious-freedom>.

than 37,500 people are estimated to have been killed since Boko Haram's insurgency started in 2011⁴, while at least 3641 people were killed between January 2016 and October 2018 due to Fulani militant violence (57% of them in 2018 alone)⁵. Between October 2019 and September 2020 5678 people were killed due to Boko Haram insurgents, Fulani militants and armed bandits.⁶

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Fulani militant violence

Currently, violence in the Middle Belt has become one of Nigeria's most serious security challenge. Six times deadlier than Boko Haram in 2018, Fulani militant violence has displaced hundreds of thousands and intensified ethnic and religious divisions in the country.⁷ The violence has complex and often disputed root causes. It deprives an increasing number of people of their homes, human dignity, and lives on a daily basis. On April 20, 2021, Fulani militants attacked Greenfield University in southern Kaduna and abducted 22 students and a member of staff. Militants killed five of

the abducted within a week.⁸ On April 25, 2021, Fulani militants attacked a Sunday service of a Baptist church in Chikun Local Government Area (LGA), southern Kaduna. The militants killed one person, injured another and abducted four women.⁹

The Nigerian Government's inadequate response to the escalating crisis fosters impunity and heavily questions the Nigerian Security Forces (NSF) and their accountability. There are several concerning reports of willful negligence or, at worst, complicity, by the NSF in deadly attacks against predominantly Christian farmer communities. NSF officers reportedly abandoned villagers seeking protection from Fulani militants, ignored credible warnings of imminent attacks and did not arrest known attackers.¹⁰ In February 2016, the Nigerian Government established a Human Rights Desk for the army aimed at investigating and curbing human rights violations by NSF officials. Special focus has been given to violations regarding the Boko Haram insurgency;¹¹ but not to alleged violations committed by the NSF in the Middle Belt.

This climate of impunity is intensified by the scale of proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) in the country. Fulani militants attacking farmer communities have access to military-grade weapons such as machine guns and AK-type rifles.¹² Studies show that civilians possess the majority of weapons in

⁴ <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/boko-haram-nigeria>.

⁵ "Nigeria: The Harvest of Death - Three Years of Bloody Clashes Between Farmers and Herders in Nigeria", *Amnesty International*, December 2018. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/9503/2018/en/>.

⁶ "WWL 2021 - Compilation of all main documents", *World Watch Research*, January 2021, pp. 44-47. Available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/WWL-2021-Compilation-of-main-documents-ODA-version.pdf>.

⁷ Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence, International Crisis Group, July 2018. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/262-stopping-nigerias-spiralling-farmer-herder-violence>.

⁸ https://www.legit.ng/1414238-bandits-threaten-kill-remaining-students-abducted-from-kaduna-private-varsity.html?utm_source=direct&utm_medium=rads.

⁹ <https://www.csw.org.uk/2021/04/26/press/5238/article.htm>

¹⁰ *Amnesty International*, *Ibid.*, pp., 50-57.

¹¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/NigeriacreatesamilitaryHumanRightsDesk.aspx>.

¹² *Amnesty International*, *Ibid.*, pp. 50-61; 35-37.



Pastor Jeremiah's* village was attacked by Fulani herdsman in April 2020 as part of a wave of violence against Christians in Nigeria's Middle Belt. *Name changed for security reasons

circulation in Nigeria, and that the majority of arms in Nigeria are held illegally. The Nigerian Government's efforts to control the proliferation of SALWs do not address its root causes, failing to reduce the amount of arms in circulation and consequently the level of violence affecting the Nigerian people and the respect of their inalienable rights.¹³ Predominantly Christian communities complain of the Government's failure to seize Fulani militants' weapons – with the NSF often showing up only hours after a Fulani militia attack, leaving predominantly Christian communities defenseless and at the mercy of violent militants.

Fulani militant violence has displaced hundreds of thousands and intensified ethnic and religious divisions in the country

The cocktail of inadequate government response, negligence by the NSF and the proliferation of SALWs results in an extreme level of insecurity and fosters violence, which particularly affects Christian communities in the Middle Belt. Despite having ratified the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, the Nigerian Government is yet to transpose it into national law and take concrete measures to prevent and regulate the civilian circulation of arms to avoid arms possession by militants and criminal groups perpetrating violence.

Boko Haram/ISWAP and bandits in the North

Despite Buhari's declaration that Boko Haram was militarily defeated in 2015, they and their offshoot ISWAP are still more than capable of causing devastation in attacks – which includes abducting a significant number of Christian women and girls, causing wounds and trauma to whole communities and families and destabilizing security in Nigeria.¹⁴ Militants have held hostages for years. On April 14, 2014, 276 schoolgirls were abducted by Boko Haram in Chibok. More than 100 of them remain in captivity as of today. The families of the hostages hardly ever receive updates on the government's efforts to release them.¹⁵

Arms proliferation, impunity and Government inaction



Amina has faced Boko Haram violence twice. In 2012 they came to her house to kill her husband and sons and, in 2017, they kidnapped her and held her hostage for eight months.

allowed the expansion of Boko Haram and increasing violence in the northwest of Nigeria, where attacks by armed bandits on villages and schools are becoming endemic.¹⁶ Between December 2020 and March 2021 there have been at least five reported cases of abductions of schoolchildren in the north of Nigeria.¹⁷ On 11 December 2020, armed bandits abducted 300 students from a school in Kankara, Kastina state. The students were held in captivity for six nights until their release. The Government's only response to the abductions was to close about 600 schools in the region, putting the right to children's education at risk. So far, no one has been held accountable for the abductions.¹⁸ The lack of Government action is fostering impunity and encouraging bandits to continue with their attacks. A military solution to this security crisis is insufficient to address the root causes of the formation of militant groups, the spread of radical narratives and increased banditry. Comprehensive programs aimed at disseminating counter-radical narratives, addressing distrust between communities and the NSF, and aimed at targeting socio-economic factors that create discontent and disillusionment in young generations should be promoted and encouraged especially in Nigeria's northern states. In the short term, it is of utmost importance that the Nigerian Government takes all measures to ensure the safe return of children to school and ensure security in schools in northern Nigeria.

¹³ J. U. Yahaya, "An overview of the security implication of inflow of Small Arms and Light Weapons: A Nigeria Perspectives", pp. 18-22. Available at : https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340870416_An_overview_of_the_security_implication_of_inflow_of_Small_Arms_and_Light_Weapons_A_Nigeria_Perspectives.

¹⁴ "WWL 2021 Compilation of Pressure Points and GSRP profiles for countries ranking 1-74", *World Watch Research*, March 2021, pp. 17-18. Available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/WWL-2021-Compilation-of-74-GSRP-Profiles.pdf>.

¹⁵ <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/10/leah-sharibus-mother-pleads-to-nigerian-president-as-kidnappers-threaten-to-kill-leah/>.

¹⁶ <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/boko-haram-teams-up-with-bandits-in-nigeria>.

¹⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/04/nigeria-seven-years-since-chibok-the-government-fails-to-protect-children/>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Recommendations:

1 To prevent **impunity, ensure institutional accountability** and **curb endemic violence** in Nigeria, the International Community should:

- Liaise and cooperate with the Nigerian Army Human Rights Desk, and urge the Desk to investigate and prosecute violations from armed forces across Nigeria. Training programs on international human rights standards, including religious tolerance, should be an integral part of the mandate and work of the Desk;
- Urge the Nigerian Government to ensure the domestication of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons into national law and ensure its full and effective implementation;
- Support the Nigerian Government in establishing a system to track, collect and destroy illegal weapons; do everything in its power to disarm members of violent militant groups;
- Work alongside the Nigerian Government to curb corruption associated with the illegal manufacturing of, trafficking in, illegal possession and use of SALWs;¹⁹
- Urge the Nigerian government to take a strong stance against all violence, including Fulani militant violence, investigate the perpetrators, hold them accountable to the justice system and break the cycle of violence that is expanding to other areas of the country.

2 To combat militant groups like **Boko Haram**, its offshoot **ISWAP** and other similar groups and to **counter radical narratives**, the International Community should:

- Urge the Nigerian President to continue his efforts to liberate the hostages held by Boko Haram, including young Christian girls such as

Leah Sharibu and the Chibok girls who are still held captive;

- Urge the Nigerian President to create a position within the Government for the sole purpose of maintaining an active family liaison and an open and accessible channel of communication with the traumatized parents of the hostages;
- Support a holistic approach to counter radical narratives in the 12 northern Sharia states, supporting and funding community-focused programs of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the region aimed at targeting the socio-economic factors that contribute the spreading of extremist ideals. Reforms to educational programs and curricula aimed at providing inclusive education focused on inter-faith and inter-religious studies should be an essential focus of such programs.

3 The International Community should **integrate flexible funding opportunities** into their programming to allow well-coordinated and non-partisan Faith and Community Based Organizations (FBOs/CBOs) in Nigeria to carry out their work including providing access to food, safe drinking water and essential medical supplies, locally-appropriate psychosocial care, reconciliation and community-building projects amongst the internally displaced; and develop local peacebuilding initiatives to address the violence and its root causes.

4 To ensure the **respect and protection of the right to education of Nigerian children** the Nigerian Government must urgently act to restore security to schools in northern Nigeria through laying out a comprehensive plan that will ensure children's safe return to school; investigate these attacks and hold those responsible to account.

Any questions? Please email advocacy@od.org

¹⁹ ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms, Light Weapons, their ammunition and other associated material', Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), 2006, Art. 13. Available at: <http://www.poa-iss.org/regionalorganizations/ecowas/ecowas%20convention%202006.pdf>.