



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Freedom, Violence, and U.S. Policy in Nigeria

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Abe Cooper, USCIRF Vice Chair

Thank you very much Chair Turkel. I would like to join in welcoming you all to today's hearing. In 2020, prior to my time on the Commission, I, myself, travelled to Nigeria to engage with religious communities there and learn about the challenges they face. Most recently in June of this year, USCIRF sent a delegation to Nigeria to conduct research on religious freedom conditions there.

Nigeria is currently facing a myriad of security crises. Among the broader human rights ramifications of violence in Nigeria, some of this violence impacts the right to freedom of religion or belief. For example, in some regions militant Islamist groups, in the course of their political insurgencies, conduct violence targeting non-Muslims as well as Muslims who disagree with the groups' interpretation of Islamic law and practice. Identity-based violence at times manifests at the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and geographic heritage, with certain ethnoreligious groups being targeted as supposed "outsiders" or attacked for the land and social capital their group is perceived to possess. Mob justice has threatened individuals who express beliefs that others consider blasphemous. And across the country, perpetrators target worshippers, sacred ceremonies, and religious leaders and threaten those congregations' rights to worship collectively and in public, as protected under Nigerian and international law.

Today we aim to not just discuss these limitations on religious freedom in more detail, but to really get at the heart of what the U.S. government can and must do to help alleviate the situation for Nigerian faith and belief communities and ultimately improve religious freedom conditions in the country.

USCIRF consistently recommends that the State Department designate Nigeria a country of particular concern for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations. We also call for the U.S. government to appoint a Special Envoy to the Lake

Chad region to prioritize a holistic approach to these issues and ensure the full weight of the U.S. government is centered on addressing them.

I now return the floor to Chair Turkel.