



## **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**

### **Religious Freedom in Nigeria: Extremism and Government Inaction**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

#### **Vice Chair Perkins**

Thank you very much Chair Bhargava. I would like to join in welcoming you all to today's hearing.

Today we will explore some of the most common religious freedom violations Nigerians face, along with possible solutions for addressing the violence targeting religious communities.

In many areas in Nigeria, nonstate actors attack religious leaders and houses of worship with impunity and abduct and execute individuals based on their religious identity. This includes militant Islamist groups like Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa – both of which the State Department has designated as entities of particular concern for their religious freedom violations in line with USCIRF recommendations.

Islamic State in West Africa Province, or ISWAP, has held Leah Sharibu hostage for more than four years for refusing to renounce her Christian faith. Leah Sharibu turned 18 this year, and I'm proud to advocate for her as a part of our Religious Prisoners of Conscience project. Boko Haram attacked three Christian communities in northern Nigeria on Christmas Eve, and just last month armed assailants attacked two Muslim congregations worshipping at mosques during Ramadan. Unknown gunmen recently stormed a church and abducted a pastor in Ondo state, demonstrating the alarming spread of these types of attacks into the south of the country. In many parts of the country, religious identity intersects with ethnicity and politics to fuel retaliatory cycles of identity-based violence, resulting in thousands of civilian deaths each year.

In addition, Shari'a courts in the north of the country have upheld blasphemy laws against Muslim minorities, and authorities have illegally detained individuals based on their religious beliefs and expression. For example, authorities in Kano state continue to hold humanist activist Mubarak Bala in detention for expressing his atheist beliefs, despite a federal court order issued in December declaring his detention unconstitutional and demanding his release. USCIRF commissioner Fred Davie advocates for Mubarak Bala as a part of our Religious Prisoners of Conscience program. Commissioner Davie also advocates for Nigerian Islamic gospel musician Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, who is currently imprisoned for allegedly violating blasphemy laws.

Urgent action is needed to reduce these violations and hold perpetrators accountable. I look forward to hearing the testimonies of our witnesses on these issues, along with recommendations the U.S. government can implement to better support the Nigerian people as they face these atrocities. I will now give the floor back to Chair Bhargava to introduce our witnesses.