

Nigerian faith leaders insist Christians are targeted

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KADUNA, Nigeria (BP)—Nigerian church leaders insist Christians in their country are persecuted for their faith, rejecting a growing narrative that violence in their country is not religion-based.

Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's Nov. 26 [declaration of a national security emergency](#) in response to growing violence there is only "window-dressing," speakers said, and does not indicate the government will work to end Christian persecution.

In a Dec. 16 global briefing hosted by leading religious freedom advocate Open Doors International, journalist and researcher Stephen Kefas of Kaduna, Abuja House of Representatives member Terwase Orbunde, and human rights attorney, journalist and professor Jabez Musa verified atrocities committed against fellow Christians in Nigeria's Middle Belt and in the nation's north.

Refuting the Nigerian government narrative

When U.S. President [Donald Trump redesignated Nigeria a Country of Particular Concern](#) for committing or failing to stop egregious religious freedom violations, government officials insisted Christians are no more persecuted in Nigeria than Muslims.

The speakers at the global briefing refuted the narrative, confirming violence through research and personal stories of persecution. They discredited reports that violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt is driven by a

centuries-old land-rights dispute between Christians and Fulani herdsmen.

"I can say with all sense of responsibility that, indeed, Christians have been persecuted in Nigeria, and there are so many documented evidences that point to that fact that they have been persecuted in the country," said Kefas, founder of the *Middlebelt Times* and a senior analyst for the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa.

"No matter how objective you want to be, no matter how conservative you want to be, you cannot put away that fact."

Christian communities overrun by terrorists



A street vendor in Lagos displays local newspapers with headlines on gunmen abducting schoolchildren and staff of the St. Mary's Catholic Primary and Secondary School in Papiri community in Nigeria, Saturday, Nov. 22, 2025. (AP Photo/Sunday Alamba)

Kefas, a journalist and former political prisoner who has reported on

violence in the Middle Belt for more than 15 years, said Christian communities have been overrun by Islamist terrorists who have destroyed churches, abducted and killed Christians and left communities impoverished by demanding ransoms, destroying property and confiscating belongings.

While other religions exist in the Middle Belt, Kefas said, “only Christians are being targeted” there. What’s more, in the Muslim-majority north, where 12 states are governed by Sharia Law, the few Christians in the region suffer more casualties than moderate Muslims.

“How do you explain that?” Kefas asked. “What I’ve documented in the last 15 years as a journalist on the ground, I can tell you that indeed, there is an ongoing persecution against Christians in Nigeria.”

Violence intensified in Nigeria’s north with the emergence of Boko Haram in 2009, a terrorist group with ties to the Islamic State that has spurred the formation of other factions focused on violence against Christians.

“The group’s brutal tactics, including bombings, kidnappings, abductions, rape and forced marriages and killings, intensified, which have since disproportionately affected Christians and other vulnerable groups,” Musa said.

“Literally, Boko Haram prohibits and hates anything Western, particularly education, and Christianity is viewed by them as a Western culture which must be crushed.”

Musa described as conservative his estimate of Boko Haram killing more than 50,000 Christians in the northeast in the past 15 years, with hundreds of thousands of others displaced and forced to flee the region.

Heavily armed militant groups target Christians

Of the 4,476 Christians killed worldwide for their faith in 2024, the majority of them, 3,100, were killed in Nigeria, Open Doors reported in its 2025 World Watch List.

Militant Fulani, the Islamic State-West Africa Province, Lakawara and the newly emerging Mahmuda are active terrorist groups targeting Christians nationwide, advocates have said, with Genocide Watch reporting at least 62,000 Christians were killed in Nigeria between 2000 and 2020 because of their faith.

Today, militant Fulani are several times more deadly than Boko Haram and are armed with AK-47s and machine guns, Musa said. An [ORFA report](#) Kefas authored supports Musa's claim.

Nigerians in the Middle Belt are offended by the narrative that violence in the mostly Christian region is driven by an age-old land dispute between Christians and Fulani, leaders said.

Attacks coincide with Christian holy days

They pointed out Christians and Fulani lived amicably there before terrorist attacks began. And those killed are Christians, indicating Christians are not attacking Muslims, but only vice versa.

"Land is the least of the things," Orbunde said. "That may be what they ultimately want, to take the land, but first is to destroy the people. And because they are Christians, we cannot separate that fact."

Terrorists attack churches and plan their attacks to coincide with holy days, the leaders said, pointing out Middle Belt attacks at Christmas for several years, and deadly attacks at Easter in 2025 in the Middle Belt and north.

Kefas cited research and interviews he has conducted in at least 70 majority-Christian villages where Fulani lived peaceably alongside Christians for decades before terrorism spread.

“It’s the same thing we see all over the world. It happened in Australia a few days ago, when a particular people were having something they wanted to celebrate, and then you have terrorists come and kill them,” Kefas said, referencing the Dec. 14 slaughter of Jews celebrating Hanukkah at Bondi Beach. “So, I think it’s the same thing.”