

Nigerian official disputes reports of anti-Christian violence

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A high-ranking Nigerian official dismissed reports by international human rights organizations about widespread violence against Christians in his country as “not supported by the facts on the ground,” but some Nigerian Christian leaders disagreed.

Past and present members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom—along with multiple human rights groups—have called Nigeria “[the most dangerous country in the world for Christians.](#)”

However, in an Oct. 6 interview with the *Baptist Standard* via Zoom, [Mohammed Idris Malagi](#), minister of information and national orientation for Nigeria, insisted Christians are not targeted in his country—except by “violent extremists,” whom the government opposes.

“It is sad that this has been characterized as a religious conflict. We don’t believe that it is. It never has been a religious conflict. It actually is an extremist conflict,” he said.

Disputes accuracy of reported numbers

Malagi dismissed as inaccurate a [report by the International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law](#) that in the first seven months of this year [7,087 Christians were killed](#) in Nigeria and 7,800 Christians were abducted.

Based on the information it accumulated from varied sources, the group reported 30 Christians a day killed and 35 a day kidnapped during a 220-day period.

“The statistics you have reeled out are not supported by facts on the ground,” Malagi said. “Yes, we have to understand there actually is violence in Nigeria perpetrated by some extremists, targeted at both Muslims and Christians in our country. Nigeria strongly condemns that and fights that with all its available resources.”

Malagi denied that more than [18,000 churches have been burned](#) in Nigeria since 2009, as multiple sources reported.

‘Making sure attacks like this don’t happen again’

Likewise, he dismissed as incorrect a [report by Amnesty International](#) that—in the two years since Nigeria’s president assumed his office—10,217 individuals have been killed in Benue, Edo, Katsina, Kebbi, Plateau, Sokoto and Zamfara States, with more than half of those killings (6,896) occurring in Benue State.

“We have seen some of these numbers flying around here and there, including the ones from Amnesty International, but let me say we still dispute these numbers,” he said.

When asked if the government had a report of its own, documenting when and where violence is occurring and to what extent it is happening, he said it’s a complicated situation, and reporting is “a work in progress.”

“What’s more important to us is making sure that attacks like this do not happen again,” he said. “We’re calling on our international partners to join hands with us to ensure that Nigeria returns to normalcy.”

'Numbers may differ, but the pain is real'



Victims of a gunmen attack pray for peace at the internal displaced camp in Bokkos, north central Nigeria, Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023.(AP Photo/Sunday Alamba)

Joseph John Hayab, chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria in the northern states and Federal Capitol Territory, said any discussion of religious persecution in Nigeria “must be approached with honesty, empathy and a commitment to truth.”

“While there may be variations in the statistics presented by different organizations, the reality remains that many Christians in parts of the country continue to face harassment, denial of opportunities, and targeted attacks because of their faith. These experiences cannot be ignored, even as we continue to hope and work for a more just and peaceful nation,” Hayab said.

The government should acknowledge the reality of suffering, he emphasized.

“The numbers may differ, but the pain is real. What matters most is not the

figures, but the human lives lost, the families displaced, and the communities living in fear,” said Hayab, country director for the Global Peace Foundation-Nigeria.

“These are human and moral realities that deserve the government’s honest attention and collective national empathy.”

‘Act decisively to protect every citizen’

Archbishop Daniel Okoh, president of the Christian Association of Nigeria, issued a [public statement](#) Oct. 8 affirming many Christian communities in parts of Nigeria “have suffered severe attacks, loss of life, and the destruction of places of worship.”

“These realities are painful reminders of the urgent need for government and security agencies to act decisively to protect every citizen,” Okoh stated.

The Christian Association has “established mechanisms for recording incidents of religiously motivated killings, engaged with international partners, written to the International Criminal Court in the Hague, and hosted global Christian organizations” to raise awareness, he noted.

“Our concern remains that these cries for justice and protection are too often met with delay or denial,” Okoh stated.

Middle Belt an ‘epicenter of attacks’

Gideon Para-Mallam, a pastor and peace advocate, asserted, “Nigeria practices the undeclared policy of denial when it comes to the persecution of Christians in the country.”

“The Middle Belt has become the epicenter of attacks that

disproportionately target only Christian farming communities,” Para-Mallam said.

“Attackers often come in droves with military-grade weapons to raid these villages at night destroying homes and churches. Many pastors are targeted and killed. Farmlands are destroyed, and survivors are forced to flee.”

Malagi insisted the violence in the Middle Belt is “largely due to competition for resources, for land, especially between farmers and herders.”

“Criminal elements” and “violent extremists” are mostly responsible, he said, and it is “not a religious conflict per se.”

Para-Mallam offered a different perspective, asking, “If it were a farmer-herder class, why is it that only the farmers who are often of a particular religion—Christianity—get killed in such high numbers?”

‘Nigeria will continue to fight extremists’

The government in Nigeria is committed to ridding the country of extremist violence, Malagi said.

“Nigeria will continue to fight extremists that perpetrate violence toward both Christians and Muslims,” he said.

“We agree completely that Muslims and Christians and people of all faiths in this country have been attacked, and many of them have been killed. The Nigerian authorities are not taking this kindly. ... A number of measures have been taken.”

Nigeria is making progress in stopping violence perpetrated by Boko Haram, the Islamic State-West Africa Province and other radical jihadists, he said.

Nigeria's federal government has taken significant steps to protect citizens by enhancing the military presence in the Middle Belt, Malagi said.

The government also is engaged in peacemaking and long-term reconciliation initiatives in the region, as well as promoting interfaith dialogue, he added.

'More needs to be done'

Hayab commended the federal government for progress made in the past two years, but he called on the government to do more.

"It is important to acknowledge that the current administration has shown some improvement compared to the previous government, particularly in its efforts to engage faith communities and promote national unity. This progress is commendable," he said.

"However, more needs to be done to guarantee genuine freedom of religion as enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution. True democracy can only flourish when every citizen, regardless of faith, can serve God freely without fear, intimidation or discrimination."

When questioned about the sophisticated, military-grade weaponry used by militant herdsmen in the Middle Belt, Malagi said the government believes they are coming "from outside our borders." Stopping the flow of arms will require "the cooperation of our neighbors and the international community," he said.

"We are taking steps to ensure that we mitigate that significantly so that we can provide security for the lives and property of our people," Malagi

said.

State governments and the federal government are working collaboratively in law enforcement to rid the country of criminal elements and extremists, he said.

Okoh acknowledged with appreciation the government's efforts to respond to Nigeria's security challenges, but he urged the authorities to "redouble" efforts to provide "equitable protection for all."

Secular state or Sharia law?

Malagi called Nigeria a "very secular state" and "a country governed by laws," where the religious freedom of all its people is guaranteed in the constitution.

"Every member of our society is free to practice his or her religion," he said.

When asked whether the enforcement of [blasphemy laws](#) and Sharia law in 12 northern Nigerian states violate the country's constitution and Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he insisted Sharia applies only to the Muslim population—not others.

The "Nigerian Constitution is supreme," and it supersedes any regional laws, he said.

Hayab disagreed, saying, "The continued misuse of Sharia and blasphemy laws in some northern states remains a serious concern."

"In the Christian faith, salvation is instantaneous. Therefore, anyone who embraces Christianity should not be subjected to Sharia law," he said.

"Sadly, there are still cases where Christian converts are held to ransom

under such laws, denying them freedom of faith. This practice amounts to persecution and violates both the spirit and the letter of Nigeria's constitutional guarantees."

In states with Sharia law, churches find it "almost impossible" to acquire land, and renting buildings for Christian worship is "a major challenge," Para-Mallam said.

'Tools of religious and political intimidation'

More severe persecution of Christians arises from the imposition of blasphemy laws, he added.



Women react under the bridge during a march in solidarity with the victims of the Christmas Eve 2023 attack, in Jos, Nigeria, Saturday, Jan. 6, 2024. (AP File Photo/Sunday Alamba)

"Blasphemy laws have become tools of religious and political intimidation and extreme persecution, as anyone accused of blasphemy may end up being lynched without fair hearing and trial," Para-Mallam said, noting perpetrators of mob violence seldom are prosecuted.

“On paper, Sharia law is supposed to be for Muslims alone. But it’s not practicably so. We have it on record many Christians have been dragged to Sharia courts and have Sharia laws applied to them.”

In spite of the well-documented [attacks on Christians on Christmas Eve](#) in 2020, 2022 and 2023, Malagi rejected the idea that Christians are targeted, except by some extremists who also have attacked Muslim gatherings and mosques.

“Generally, Christians are not living in fear in Nigeria,” he said.

Christian casualties outnumber attacks on Muslims

Hayab agreed both terrorists and bandits have killed some Muslims and attacked worshippers in mosques, but Christian casualties remain far greater.

“While it is true that some Muslims who reject extremist ideologies have also suffered attacks, it must be acknowledged that the Christian community bears a heavier share of these incidents,” he said.

“As a nation, we must rise above these divisions and work together to promote understanding, justice, and mutual respect.”

Malagi acknowledged the criminal element and that extremists “want to exploit religious differences,” but “Muslims and Christians largely live side-by-side in harmony” in Nigeria.

“We want Christians in the United States—and, indeed, Christians all over the world—to know that Nigeria’s situation is a very complex one,” he said. “It is not driven by any systematic religious persecution of Christians.”

‘Nigeria belongs to us all’

Hayab urged the government to do more to protect all its citizens from persecution and to ensure religious freedom.

“I have called on the federal government several times to continue strengthening its security and reconciliation initiatives and to ensure that no Nigerian is denied freedom of worship or equal opportunity on the basis of religion, and we will continue to do so,” Hayab said.

“Nigeria belongs to us all, and we must join hands to build a nation where peace, truth and fairness define our coexistence, and where every citizen can freely serve God without restriction.”

Okoh offered a similar call and voiced a similar hope.

“Nigeria’s healing will not come from denial or blame, but from courage: the courage to face our collective failures, to grieve together, and to rebuild trust within our communities,” he stated.

“Only then can our nation rise from its wounds and embrace a future of genuine peace.”