

Religious discrimination fuels ‘crisis of insecurity’ in Nigeria

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WASHINGTON, D.C.—Denial of religious freedom has fueled a “crisis of insecurity” and humanitarian tragedy in Nigeria, a scholar with the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative said.

About 75,000 Nigerians—mostly women and children—are likely to starve in the next 12 months, and Elijah Brown drew a “direct line” from religious discrimination to the famine.



Elijah Brown “Right now, we are looking at a situation where the hunger is so real that 208 people could die every day, eight people every hour,” said Brown, executive vice president of the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative. “One child every eight minutes in northeastern Nigeria could starve to death. God help us.”

Brown, former religion professor at East Texas Baptist University, participated in a March 21 panel discussion co-sponsored by his organization and the Religious Freedom Center of the Newseum Institute.

Impact of Boko Haram

Boko Haram—a radical Islamist terrorist group—has destroyed 30 percent of the homes, more than 1,600 water sources and more than 200 health

centers in one northeastern Nigerian state, he reported.

“Boko Haram’s violence—horrific and gut-wrenching—does not just emerge from nowhere,” Brown said. “It emerges from a foundation of discrimination that stretches across northern and central Nigeria.”

Discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities results in limited educational and vocational opportunities, the inability to build houses of worship and denial of healthcare, community services and the right to vote, he noted.

“Children in particular have been impacted,” Brown added. As a direct result of violence by Boko Haram, 1,500 schools have been closed, denying 950,000 children the opportunity for education, he said.

“This foundation of religious discrimination, combined with a lack of economic development, lack of rule of law and elements of radicalization, has resulted in massive insecurity,” he said.

“Or to put it another way, a lack of religious freedom has helped contribute to the humanitarian tragedy unfolding in northeastern Nigeria. And let us be clear, it is a massive tragedy.”

Officially, Nigeria is home to 2.2 million internally displaced people, but the number more likely is between 5 million and 7 million—second only to Syria, Brown said.

“Denied religious freedom helped contribute to the violence of Boko Haram and is now resulting in famine,” he said. “And unfortunately, this is not the only insecurity crisis facing the country.”

Role of Fulani militants

In recent years, violence perpetrated by Fulani militants in Central Nigeria has increased significantly, Brown noted. The scale of attacks and

sophistication of the weapons goes far beyond traditional antagonism between herdsmen and farmers, he added.

“Without question, cattle rustling exists within the Middle Belt to the detriment of Fulani pastoralists,” he said. “However, the attacks of the past two years cannot be construed solely as reprisals when multiple credible reports from across the region describe assaults involving supply helicopters, machine guns mounted on vehicles, AK47s, scorched-earth policies that level entire communities and sustained offenses that may last for months in particular locations without government intervention.”

Fulani militants seem driven primarily by economic interests, seeking to gain grazing territory. However, their attacks focus almost exclusively on areas with high percentages of Christians, Brown noted, saying it is “an economic driver being played out along religious lines in an environment of general insecurity and impunity.”

“What is unfolding in the Middle Belt is an evolving conflict with significant geographical spread,” he said. “Dismissing or minimizing this as simply traditional farmer-herdsmen conflict does not adequately address a reality where thousands have been killed, weaponry and sophistication of attacks are increasing, dozens of villages have been utterly destroyed, and tens of thousands displaced. Should this reality further escalate, its impact on the country of Nigeria could be substantive.

“This is not a situation without hope. There are many within the Buhari government who are working hard to address these realities. But there is more we can do as well. It is a call to world leaders from Nigeria to the United States and to all of us to [stand with Nigeria](#).”

Fractured and forgotten

Nigeria is fractured by religious and ethnic turmoil but forgotten by most of the world, Frank Wolf, former member of the U.S. House of

Representatives and distinguished senior fellow with the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative, told the panel.



Last year, Frank Wolf traveled to Nigeria as part of a team that interviewed more than 500 people and heard firsthand testimony of violence, religious persecution and economic oppression. Last year, Wolf traveled to Nigeria as part of a team that interviewed more than 500 people and heard firsthand testimony of violence, religious persecution and economic oppression. He highlighted key findings from the detailed [report](#) the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative issued based on its research.

Wolf called on President Trump to [appoint a special envoy](#) to Nigeria and the Lake Chad region of Africa to deal with the humanitarian crisis, which he said presents a serious security threat.

Conflict in modern Nigeria cannot be understood apart from the historical reality of colonialism, said panelist Peter Pham, director of the Atlantic Council's Africa Center.

At the same time, the changing religious dynamics of the nation also must be considered, he added. Outsiders who "buy into no-longer-relevant narratives" cannot confront the problems Nigeria faces today, he insisted.

Religion and ethnicity matter deeply to Nigerians, but when either religious or political leaders view themselves as responsible only to one group, the nation suffers, said Charles Obiorah Kwuelum, legislative associate with the Mennonite Central Committee.

Unless government officials enforce the rule of law equitably and protect the rights of religious and ethnic minorities, “jungle justice” rules, he asserted.