

Violence threatens religious freedom in Nigeria

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Violence by Islamist groups, mob violence against people accused of blasphemy, identity-based violence and violence targeting worship threaten freedom of religion in Nigeria, a new report from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom states.

“Poor governance” drives much of the violence, as the government finds itself unable to provide services, security and justice in an equitable manner, according to “[Violence and Religious Freedom in Nigeria](#),” a report and policy update released Sept. 6.

Militant Islamist groups expand their territory

“Nigeria is battling several concurrent security crises,” the report states, noting first the territorial expansion of militant Islamist groups.

“In the northeast and part of the northwest, militant Islamist groups conduct violence in pursuit of political and ideological objectives, often with devastating humanitarian and religious freedom consequences,” the report says.

The commission report identifies the Islamist State in West Africa Province as the “largest threat,” but also noted activity by factions of Boko Haram and the al-Qaeda affiliate Ansaru.

“ISWAP, Boko Haram and Ansaru have all stated political objectives to overthrow secular governance in Nigeria and enforce a particular

interpretation of Islam,” the report states. “Militant Islamist groups target non-Muslim communities, as well as Muslims who disagree with or oppose their interpretation of Islamic practice and tradition.”

Government investigations blamed ISWAP for a Pentecost Sunday attack on a Catholic church in Ondo State, in which 40 people were killed, the report noted.

Earlier in the year, ISWAP was alleged to be responsible for three deaths when a church in Chibok was burned, as well as another three killed and 19 injured when a bar was bombed in Taraba State in an attempt to target a gathering of “infidel Christians.”

“ISWAP cruelly punishes those it sees as contravening its interpretations of Islam, including amputating the hands of alleged thieves, killing adulterers, and massacring civilians in communities that disobey orders or refuse to pay religious obligation taxes,” the report states.

Mob violence against accused blasphemers

The commission report also points to mob violence against people accused of blasphemy, particularly in the eyes of Islamist militants.

A mob of university students in May stoned a Christian student to death and burned her body in response to a comment she made on social media they considered insulting to Islam.

Mob violence—or the likelihood of it—“creates an atmosphere of fear and insecurity for people with dissenting beliefs and worldviews,” the report states.

“The high risk of mob violence against people who are perceived to insult

religion, combined with poor governance and weak justice institutions, constitutes the state's justification for enforcing blasphemy laws to prevent mob justice and maintain public order," the report states.

"These laws disproportionately impact individuals with minority or dissenting opinions or religious interpretations."

Religious and ethnic groups targeted

The report notes instances of violence in which attackers target individuals or groups based on their perceived identification with a particular group.

"In some states, religion, ethnicity and geographic heritage intersect to create in-groups and out-groups against which violent actors mobilize," the report states. It notes religious communities "have grown increasingly mistrustful of one another and fearful of being targeted on the basis of religion."

The report also documents instances in which "armed actors target worshippers and religious congregations."

"In March 2022, alleged bandits reportedly abducted 14 worshippers from a mosque during Isha prayers in Kaduna. In June, two [simultaneous attacks on churches in Kaduna State](#) reportedly killed eight people and resulted in 38 abductions," the report states. "In July, armed actors abducted two priests in Kaduna State, resulting in the death of one."

'Poor governance a core driver of violence'

The report states during the commission's June 2022 visit to Nigeria, "various stakeholders identified poor governance as a core driver of

violence in the country and lamented the government's inability to provide services, security and justice equitably across its population."

Poverty, corruption and religious scapegoating also contribute to violence and human rights abuses, including violations of religious freedom, the report notes.

"The risk of atrocities for Nigeria is high," the report states. "In 2021, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's Early Warning Project ranked Nigeria's risk of experiencing a new mass killing event in the coming year as the eighth highest in the world and noted that it had experienced at least one mass killing event the previous year.

"Nigerians also face abduction, torture, inhumane treatment, sexual and gender-based violence, trafficking, and forced or coerced recruitment. Apparent territorial and tactical advancement by powerful armed groups in 2022 heighten atrocity risks still further.

"These atrocities pose risks to religious freedom, among other rights and freedoms, for Nigerians."

Violence and its impact on religious freedom—as well as elevated risk of atrocities—"warrant significant U.S. government action," the report concludes.

The commission report calls on the U.S. government to:

- Designate the nation as a priority country for the Atrocity Prevention Task Force or name a special envoy to regions where violence based on religion is particularly high. "Alternatively, Congress passing a high-profile emergency atrocity prevention package could demonstrate a similar show of commitment to

protecting freedom of religion or belief and other fundamental rights for all Nigerians.”

- Make financial aid to Nigeria “conditioned on demonstrated, calculable progress on human rights and atrocity prevention indicators by the Nigerian government.”
- Redesignate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern “for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom.”
- Increase funding to violence reduction programs in Nigeria, particularly programs that support interfaith civil society action to promote religious freedom and give victims of attacks increased access to justice.
- Request the Government Accountability Office investigate the effectiveness of U.S. assistance to Nigeria to achieve U.S. policy objectives there and then adjust policy based on outcomes of the assessment.



Randel Everett

Randel Everett, founding president of 21Wilberforce, said the findings in the report are consistent with what his human rights organization discovered several years ago, and he lamented that “violence and the rising risk for atrocity has increased significantly.”

“Six years ago, 21Wilberforce’s executive team traveled to Nigeria to document the impact of violence and marginalization on religious freedom

and human rights in northern and central Nigeria, and to listen to and learn from a wide range of actors pointing to approaches that could build reconciliation and reverse trends that threatened to fracture Nigeria along religious fault lines,” said Everett, former executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

“Our team traveled to multiple sites in four states and met with representatives from seven other states. We traveled past dozens of villages that had been burned to the ground and met with both Christian and Muslim victims of massacres perpetrated by Boko Haram and Fulani militants. Upon our return, we released the report ‘[Nigeria: Fractured and Forgotten](#).’ Since that initial trip in 2016, 21Wilberforce remains actively engaged with local and international partners to seek solutions to the problems that face Nigeria and to help those who are suffering.

“The situation in Nigeria was complex and multi-faceted then and tragically, the violence and rising risk for atrocity has increased significantly.

“We strongly support recommendations presented in USCIRF’s policy update on violence in Nigeria, including a call to redesignate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern.”