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KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remained poor, with both state and nonstate actors committing particularly severe violations of religious freedom. While some officials worked to address drivers of religious freedom violations, others actively infringed on the religious freedom rights of Nigerians, including by enforcing blasphemy laws. Criminal activity and violent armed group incidents impacting religious freedom worsened.

A Shari’a court sentenced [Sheikh Abduljabar Kabara](#) to death for blasphemy. Judicial authorities sentenced humanist leader [Mubarak Bala](#) to 24 years in prison for blasphemy and other charges. A high court ruled that blasphemy laws in Shari’a penal codes are constitutional and remanded the blasphemy case against [Yahaya Sharif Aminu](#) back to Shari’a courts for retrial. In September, armed officers conducted a [surprise raid](#) on the residence of the presiding judge of the Kano Court of Appeal, who was the only judge who dissented the ruling. Kabara, Bala, and Sharif Aminu remained incarcerated at year’s end, along with several other individuals accused of blasphemy. Meanwhile, religious police [arrested](#) 19 people accused of organizing a wedding ceremony for two individuals of the same sex in Kano State, where Muslims convicted of [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex \(LGBTQI+\) activity](#) face execution or public flogging under Shari’a legal codes.

Mob violence in Zamfara killed Christian university student Deborah Yakubu due to blasphemy accusations. Officials in Bauchi State arrested Christian healthcare worker Rhoda Jatau for blasphemy for comments she shared on social media in the aftermath of the violence. Authorities only brought minor charges against two of the instigators of violence against Yakubu and no charges against the instigators of violence against Jatau.

Rampant violence and atrocities across Nigeria continued to impact freedom of religion or belief, including militant Islamist violence; some forms of identity-based violence; mob violence;

and criminal, political, and vigilante violence impacting worship. The Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) claimed several attacks against Christian communities, including allegedly killing 40 people in an attack on a Catholic Church in Ondo State during Pentecost Sunday services and bombing a market in Borno State that sold alcohol.

In many of the country’s complex violent crises, armed actors targeted worshipers and religious leaders. Attacks targeted churches and mosques in Kaduna State, mosques in Zamfara and Katsina states, and several Christian leaders in other parts of the country. Tensions at the intersection of ethnicity, religion, and geographic heritage yielded atrocities in several regions, including in Plateau, Benue, and Anambra states.

Federal authorities accelerated efforts to address violence impacting religious freedom, including by institutionalizing harsher punishments against perpetrators, improving [military efforts](#) to neutralize Islamist fighters in the north, and strengthening efforts to investigate and arrest perpetrators of the most egregious attacks. The effectiveness of these efforts remained in question, while in some regions state and local officials failed to fully prosecute individuals who incited mob violence against alleged blasphemers.

Security and judicial sector reform aimed at deterring and providing redress for religious violence remained stagnant, with such efforts largely absent from or peripheral to leading politicians’ policy priorities. The government’s human rights record continued to be poor, with [reports emerging](#) of a decades-long forced abortion campaign facilitated by the Nigerian military against rescued abductees of Boko Haram.

Despite continued religious freedom challenges in the country, in November the U.S. Department of State failed to designate Nigeria as a country of particular concern (CPC) for engaging in particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Nigeria as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and redesignate Boko Haram and ISWAP as “entities of particular concern,” or EPCs, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
- Appoint a Special Envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin to maximize U.S.

diplomatic efforts to address religious freedom violations and atrocity risk in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin; and

- Diplomatically, financially, and administratively support Nigerian civil society organizations to coordinate a national dialogue on implementing [United Nations Human Rights Council \(UNHCR\) Resolution 16/18](#) and to promote religious freedom and tolerance while safeguarding freedom of expression.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Revitalize the bipartisan Nigeria caucus to place due focus on security, atrocity risk, human rights, and religious freedom challenges in Nigeria; and
- Request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) investigate the effectiveness of U.S. assistance to Nigeria in achieving religious freedom objectives in the country.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom, Violence, and U.S. Policy in Nigeria](#)
- **Policy Update:** [Violence and Religious Freedom in Nigeria](#)
- **Policy Update:** [Blasphemy Laws in Nigeria](#)
- **Commission Delegation Visit:** [Abuja in June 2022](#)
- **Podcast:** [Religious Freedom Takeaways on the Ground in Nigeria](#)

Background

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with an estimated [219 million people](#). Among these, 53.5 percent identify as Muslim; 45.9 percent identify as Christian; and 0.6 percent identify with other religious or nonreligious beliefs, including atheism, African traditional religions, the Baha'i faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. Nigeria's [1999 Constitution](#) protects freedom of religion or belief and prohibits the state from establishing a state religion. The [Nigerian Criminal Code](#) includes a penalty of up to two years' imprisonment for blasphemy. Twelve northern states use Islamic Shari'a criminal and family codes alongside civil and customary laws. These Shari'a codes prohibit blasphemy and other offenses based on Islamic law as interpreted by each state's High Court.

Blasphemy Cases

In December, a Shari'a court sentenced Sheikh [Abduljabbar Kabara](#) to [death by hanging](#) for offending the Prophet in his preaching. In April, a court in Kano State sentenced humanist leader [Mubarak Bala](#) to [24 years in prison](#) for blasphemy after he pled guilty against the advice of his lawyers and seemingly against his own convictions. In August, a high court in Kano [ruled](#) that blasphemy laws in Shari'a penal codes are constitutional and remanded the blasphemy case against Tijaniyya Muslim [Yahaya Sharif Aminu](#) back to Shari'a courts for retrial.

In May, a mob in Zamfara State stoned Christian student [Deborah Yakubu](#) to death and burned her body because they perceived remarks she made in a WhatsApp thread as insulting to Islam. In June, a mob in Abuja stoned and burned Muslim [Ahmad Usman](#) to death for alleged blasphemy, although investigations implicated organized criminal activity as likely playing a major role in the incident.

Some government officials made [public statements](#) condemning mob violence against alleged blasphemers and issued [temporary curfews](#) to quell rising threats to public safety. However, authorities [limited charges](#) against two alleged perpetrators of violence that killed Yakubu to bailable offenses. When a mob in Bauchi State mobilized to retaliate against Christian healthcare worker [Rhoda Jatau](#) for making comments they considered blasphemous in the aftermath of Yakubu's murder, authorities arrested Jatau on charges of blasphemy instead of arresting those who incited violence against her.

Violence Impacting Religious Freedom

Rampant violence and atrocities across Nigeria continued to impact freedom of religion or belief for many Nigerians. During a rampage across several villages in February, ISWAP [burned](#) at least one church. In April, ISWAP [bombed a bar](#) in Taraba State in an attempt to target "infidel Christians," killing three and injuring 19. Investigations allege that ISWAP [killed at least 40 people](#) in a June attack on Pentecost Sunday targeting a Catholic Church in Owo, Ondo State. In October, ISWAP [attacked a church](#) in Kogi State, killing two people and injuring several others. Boko Haram also continued to [commit violations](#) in its

campaign to install undemocratic Islamic rule, with [100](#) of the school-girls they abducted in Chibok in 2014 still missing.

Complex violent crises across the country involving dynamic alliances of insurgent, criminal, and vigilante actors also impacted freedom of worship for both Muslims and Christians. In Kaduna State in March, alleged bandits reportedly abducted [14 worshipers](#) from a mosque during Isha prayers. In June, two simultaneous [attacks on churches](#) in Kaduna State reportedly killed eight people and resulted in 38 abductions. In July, armed actors [abducted two priests](#) in Kaduna State, resulting in the death of one. In September, gunmen kidnapped [dozens of worshipers](#) from Friday prayers in Zamfara State, and later that month armed assailants [killed 15 people](#) during an attack on a mosque. In December, gunmen abducted [19 worshipers](#) from a mosque in Katsina State.

In Plateau State in March 2022, tensions triggered by an attack on a convoy of Muslim worshipers in August 2021 [reignited](#), resulting in fatalities from both Muslim and Christian communities. In May, armed assailants [killed](#) a pregnant Muslim Hausa woman and her four children, with local analysis concluding that discrimination likely played a key role in the attack.

In January, the Nigerian government [issued a policy](#) considering all activities by or in support of "bandits" and "gunmen" as prosecutable under the Terrorism Prevention Act (2013). In April, the Nigerian Congress made kidnapping [punishable](#) by death and criminalized ransom payments in an attempt to curb growing abduction rackets that have impacted religious leaders and worshipers. Authorities also made several [prominent arrests](#), including five individuals for conducting the Pentecost church attack in Owo.

Despite these efforts, ISWAP [expanded its territorial reach](#) and conducted [several sophisticated](#) attacks in 2022. While the Nigerian government often projects an overly optimistic picture of its capacity and readiness to combat violent actors, sources from the ground allege that chronic institutional challenges plague the effectiveness of Nigeria's security and judicial systems.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2022, the Joseph R. Biden administration again [failed to designate](#) Nigeria as a CPC for engaging in particularly severe religious freedom violations, having removed it from the CPC list the previous year. In April, the U.S. Congress approved the release of a nearly [\\$1 billion weapons sale](#) to Nigeria that was paused due to human rights concerns, garnering [criticism](#) from human rights organizations. The U.S. Embassy in Nigeria held [several trainings](#) with Nigerian security forces to [improve civilian protection](#) in military operations. The U.S. government continued to support peacebuilding programs and efforts to promote interfaith dialogue and harmony. The U.S. Embassy also [demonstrated commitment](#) to protect Nigeria's religious and cultural heritage, including by funding a project to protect the [Busanyin Shrine](#) in the Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove.