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UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

JULY 2012

**FACTSHEET: Religious Freedom Violations
and Religious Violence in Nigeria**

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has reported on violations of religious freedom and religiously-related violence in Nigeria since 2002. In 2009, USCIRF recommended for the first time that the U.S. government designate Nigeria a “country of particular concern” (CPC) for its unwillingness to address ongoing, egregious and systemic religious freedom violations. Since 2002, the majority of religious freedom violations have been due to sectarian violence in the northern and Middle Belt states, as well as the implementation of sharia law in the 12 northern states. Boko Haram has engaged in gross religious freedom violations only in the past couple of years and separately from the two concerns previously noted. However, recent Boko Haram attacks on Christians and concerns about Christian reprisals could lead to an intersection of terrorist attacks and Muslim-Christian communal violence, causing a dramatic deterioration of religious freedom and stability in Nigeria.

Boko Haram

- Boko Haram (a Hausa-language name meaning as western education is a sin, given to the militants by Northern Nigerians) is an Islamic sect that sees the federal and northern state governments, as well as political and religious elites, as morally corrupt. Boko Haram rejects the west and the secular state and seeks the universal implementation of “pure” sharia law to resolve the ills facing northern Nigerian Muslims. While sharia is already applied in the 12 northern Nigeria states, the organization believes that it has been corrupted by politicians for their own gain.
- Boko Haram started in 2002 in Yobe and Borno state and is based in Maiduguri. Despite the extrajudicial killing of its former leader and the arrests of hundreds of followers (later released during prison breaks) in 2009, Boko Haram has grown in numbers and operates throughout northern Nigeria. Boko Haram is known to receive training from and have connections with al-Qaeda in the Maghreb.

- Boko Haram targets include police stations, government buildings, churches, politicians, newspapers, banks, and schools. Tactics include drive-by shootings on motorcycles, the use of improvised explosive devices, and starting in 2011, suicide bombings. In August 2011, individuals claiming to be affiliated with Boko Haram took responsibility for bombing the United Nations' main office in Abuja, an attack that killed 34 people.

Boko Haram's Religious Freedom Violations

- Boko Haram is increasingly targeting the Christian community in northern Nigeria. The group has attacked eleven churches in 2012 to date. At least 125 persons have been killed and more than 250 injured. These include the following attacks:
 - June 17: suicide bombing of the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) in Zaria
 - June 17: suicide bombing of Christ the King Catholic Church in Zaria
 - June 17: suicide bombing of the Shalom Church in Kaduna city
 - June 10: shooting inside of Borno state's Church of Brethren in Nigeria
 - June 10: suicide bombing of Christ's Chosen Church of God in Jos
 - June 3: suicide bombing of the Living Faith church outside of Bauchi
 - April 29: shooting of Catholic Mass at Bayero University in Kano city
 - April 29: shooting of Church of Christ in Nigeria in Maiduguri
 - April 9, Easter Sunday: suicide bombing near the Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) Good News church and the All Nations Christian Assembly in Kaduna city
 - March 11: suicide bombing at St. Finbar's Catholic Church in Jos
 - February 26: suicide bombing at Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN) in Jos
 - February 21: bombing of Christ Embassy church in Suleja
 - January 22: bombing and shooting of the Evangelical Church Willing All (ECWA) outside of Bauchi

Boko Haram is also responsible for a series of deadly attacks around the 2010 and 2011 Christmas holidays. On Christmas day 2011, bombs exploded in or around churches in Jos, Kano, Madalla, Gadaka, and Damaturu; 40 died in Madalla alone. On Christmas Eve 2010, a policeman was killed while guarding a church and a number of churches were attacked in Maiduguri, killing six and injuring 25.

In December 2011, people thought to be affiliated with or sympathetic to Boko Haram threatened all Christians and non-northerners living in the north, issuing statements telling them to leave in three days or they would be killed. After the deadline, attacks against Christians, churches, and non-northerners resumed with more intensity, including in the suburbs of Abuja, resulting in well over 100 deaths and many more injured.

- Boko Haram is also responsible for the assassination of Muslim clerics who objected to the group's activities and religious doctrine.
 - March 2011: Imam Ibrahim Ahmed Abdullahi, a reported advocate of non-violence and critic of sectarianism, was shot at least five times at his home in Maiduguri.
 - October 2010: Imam Bashir Kashara, who reportedly criticized Boko Haram's doctrine on his weekly radio program, was murdered in Maiduguri.

History of Sectarian Violence

- Since 1998, religiously-related and inter-communal violence in Nigeria has resulted in more than 14,000 deaths and thousands displaced, with numerous churches, mosques, businesses, vehicles, private homes, and other structures burned and destroyed.
- Religion and religious identity are intertwined in Nigeria's ethnic, political, economic, and social controversies, and can be misused by politicians, religious leaders, or others to rouse their constituencies for political gain or other purposes.
- In past years, the most severe incidents have occurred in Jos, Plateau State (September 2001, November 2008, January 2010, March 2010, December 2010, and January-April 2011); Bauchi State (January 2011); Kaduna State (February and May 2000 and November 2002, April 2011); Kano State and Yelwa, Plateau State (February-May 2004); and northern and southeastern Nigeria (February 2006).
- The most recent episode of large-scale violence occurred in April 2011, immediately following the Presidential elections, when more than 800 people were killed in three days of rioting in the northern states, and more than 65,000 were displaced. Protests by supporters of the main opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, a northern Muslim who lost the presidential election, quickly turned violent against Christians who were thought to have been sympathetic to incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan. Individuals were killed because of their religious identity and churches and mosques were attacked. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) reported that at least 187 people were killed, 243 people injured, and more than 430 churches burned or destroyed. Some of the worst post-election violence between Muslims and Christians occurred in Kaduna State. Human Rights Watch reports that more than 500 were killed in Kaduna State, the vast majority of whom were Muslims.

Convergence of Boko Haram's Agenda and Nigeria's History of Sectarian Violence

- The suicide bombings in Bauchi, Jos, Kano, and Kaduna took place in hot spots where Muslim-Christian violence has frequently occurred, most recently following the April 2011 post-election violence noted above. In recent years, sectarian violence has started in one northern city and spread to others. The attacks are part of an effort by Boko Haram to ignite such tensions.
- The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has repeatedly warned of reprisals to the Boko Haram attacks and what it believes is an inadequate government response.
- The only incident to date of northern Christian reprisals in response to Boko Haram attacks occurred on June 17 in response to the three suicide bombings in Kaduna State, which killed at least 40 people and wounded 60. Following those Sunday suicide bombings, Christian youths mounted roadblocks and killed presumed Muslims, burned one mosque, and vandalized another before a curfew was imposed. On Monday and Tuesday, Muslims rioted, destroying one church, shooting guns, and burning cars and shops.
- Southern Nigerians have also warned of retaliations against northern Muslims living in the south in response to Boko Haram attacks on southern Christians in the north, creating a danger for violence to spread countrywide. In January 2012, one week after Boko Haram killed a number of Christian southerners, dozens of Hausa Fulani in Delta State were attacked, five killed, and an Islamic school was torched.

USCIRF Recommendations

- The U.S. government should continue to support efforts by the Nigerian government to tackle Boko Haram, including:
 - continue, strengthen, and expand its efforts to protect churches and other targets vulnerable to Boko Haram attacks. In several incidents, suicide bombers have been prevented from reaching their intended church targets, either all together or in proximity, because of police stationed at churches;
 - fully utilize the judiciary to combat the Boko Haram movement, and not rely solely on a counterterrorism strategy involving the security services apparatus;
 - support interfaith efforts that urge religious and political leaders, both Muslim and Christian, to stop using religion to incite violence or mobilize constituencies, and call on the Nigerian government to reinvigorate the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) or other appropriate forums to strengthen Christian and Muslim leadership consultation and development of strategies and practices to address religious freedom violations; and

- take steps to professionalize its police and military forces by conducting specialized training for its military and security forces on human rights standards, as well as non-lethal responses.
- The United States should encourage and support immediate efforts in Nigeria to prevent, quickly respond to and end the culture of impunity in response to any religiously-related violence in order to prevent Boko Haram from using local conflicts to further its own agenda, including:
 - vigorously investigating, prosecuting, and bringing to justice perpetrators of all sectarian and communal violence, as to date, virtually no one has been sentenced to jail despite thousands dying in communal violence;
 - developing effective conflict-prevention and early-warning mechanisms at the local, state, and federal levels using practical and implementable criteria;
 - developing the capability to deploy specialized police and army units rapidly to prevent and combat sectarian violence in cities around the country where there has been a history of sectarian violence;
 - taking steps to professionalize its police and military forces in their investigative, community policing, crowd control, and conflict prevention capacities by conducting specialized training for military and security forces on human rights standards, as well as non-lethal responses to crowd control and quelling mob or communal violence;
 - enhancing the use of legal and law enforcement mechanisms and intelligence capabilities to prevent the formation of violent religious groups;
 - supporting interfaith efforts that urge religious and political leaders, both Muslim and Christian, to stop using religion to incite violence or mobilize constituencies, and call on the Nigerian government to reinvigorate the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) or other appropriate forums to strengthen Christian and Muslim leadership consultation and development of strategies and practices to address religious freedom violations; and
 - calling on the Nigerian government to eliminate “indigene” status through either constitutional reform or judicial review. The 1999 constitution identified the status of indigeneship, (persons whose ethnic group is considered native to a particular area, while settlers are those who have ethnic roots in another part of the country) in Article 147. Indigenes often receive privileges, such as political positions, access to government employment, and lower school fees, creating tensions between those considered indigene and non-indigene.