



## **Rejoinder from NGOs to the Federal Government of Nigeria’s Response to the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief Report *Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?***

### **Executive Summary**

We submit this rejoinder as a response to Nigerian presidential spokesman Garba Shehu’s statement rejecting the All-Party Parliamentary Group’s report *Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?*, in which the Group reveals that the persecution of and violence towards Nigerian Christians by Islamist and jihadist groups Boko Haram and Fulani militant herders is increasing the risk of a possible genocide.

Summary of the claims that the Nigerian government made:

- 1) *That information in the report was political and the Nigerian government continues to uphold the constitutional freedoms.*
- 2) *That Nigeria has pushed back the terrorists and largely reduced their capacity in the last five years compared with the previous decade.*
- 3) *That tensions between Christianity and Islam - and between herders and farmers are due to access to ever-decreasing arable and farmland due to a rapidly rising population, temperatures and desertification through global warming.*
- 4) *That the exacerbation of violence is due to crimes perpetrated by Boko Haram.*
- 5) *That the Nigerian government is “irrevocably committed” to address the Boko Haram and criminal attacks.*
- 6) *That Nigeria is “continuing and increasing [...] efforts” to finally finish Boko Haram.*

- 7) *That Nigeria is “continuing to seek, negotiate for, and secure” the return the return of all those held hostage.*
- 8) *That the Federal and State Governments are rolling out programmes to grant access to arable farmland.*
- 9) *That Nigeria is countering fake news on social and digital media.*
- 10) *That the Nigerian government “will at all times work with those both within and without Nigeria” with a concern for the rights to freedom of thought conscience and religion.*

The rejoinder addresses and responds to the different concerns and allegations made by the Presidential spokesperson Shehu in-depth, broken into several sections, each of them numbered. At the end we provide recommendations for the Federal Government to consider and review.

### **Formal Rejoinder**

*(1) "Although it is difficult reading, the statement also acknowledges the importance of accurate, unbiased, depoliticised and truthful information when it comes to understanding the realities and addressing the challenges for those of faith in Nigeria. In this regard, when uncritical attention is afforded to critics with dubious intentions, it only becomes harder for both the government and people of Nigeria to engage in constructive dialogue to resolve our differences, and uphold what is enshrined in our constitution and laws: that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion." – Garba Shehu<sup>1</sup>, Presidential Spokesman*

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief released their report *Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?*<sup>2</sup> with the principles of impartiality in mind- the group, consisting of over 100 British parliamentarians from multiple political parties and faiths, as well as from both Houses of Parliament. This report is neither biased nor political in nature, it is simply a compilation of information they have received from a plethora of organizations as well as from some firsthand visits by some Members, and a corresponding evaluation of the situation and its implications.

From the outset the APPG reached out to various NGOs and organisations from a diversity of backgrounds and beliefs. Nor does the APPG have dubious intentions- in the report's introduction, the group states plainly that this report has been written in response to the growing concern among constituents regarding the situation of "dramatic and escalating inter-communal violence in Nigeria" as well as the multitude of varying opinions on the factors of the violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt. This report was not written to generate a political discussion or 'criticize' the Nigerian government's response; rather, it was written to comprehensively address the situation and provide a list of recommendations to both the Nigerian government and international community on how to tackle the increasing trend of violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Sahara Reporters, "Nigerian Government Rejects UK Group's Report on Religious Freedom in Country", 19 June 2020.

<sup>2</sup> All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, *Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide? An Inquiry by the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief*, 15 June 2020

Contrary to presidential spokesman Shehu's comment that it is of utmost importance to uphold constitutional rights of its citizens, the United States Department of State, Open Doors, and USCIRF all reveal that Nigerian citizens have routinely had their constitutional freedoms of thought, conscience, and religion violated- by both state and non-state actors. Shi'a Muslims are repeatedly detained for their activism and religious belief; Groups of Christians were beheaded by masked ISIS militants during the week of Christmas in 2019; Boko Haram wreaks havoc on Christian communities and military stations; and Fulani militants have killed thousands of Christian farmers in northern and central Nigeria.

Moreover, despite the Nigerian government's alleged commitment to protecting and promoting its citizens' freedom of religion or belief, the government continues to permit Nigerian states to establish courts that implement sharia jurisdiction, meaning that non-Muslim Nigerian citizens can be accused of crimes and handed down punishments that apply only to Muslims via the Quran.

(2) *"In concert with our American and British allies, Nigeria's military have pushed back the terrorists and largely reduced their capacity over the last five years compared to the previous decade."*<sup>3</sup> – Garba Shehu, Presidential Spokesman

It is true that President Buhari's Nigerian military was relatively successful in combatting and shrinking Boko Haram capabilities and areas of influence in 2015, and in fact he made multiple comments throughout the year that Boko Haram was "technically defeated" following the destruction of various different training camps and cells, and a successful multi-national initiative taken up by Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Benin which pushed Boko Haram out of multiple northern provinces in Nigeria. However, Boko Haram has experienced a massive resurgence within the past two years. According to the International Committee on Nigeria<sup>4</sup> (ICON), from the period of 2000 to 2014, Boko Haram was the primary actor in 2,989 incidents in Nigeria causing 20,436 deaths. In contrast, states directly surrounding Nigeria experienced only 147 Boko Haram-related incidents and 1,261 deaths as a result of these incidents. From 2015 to the first half of 2020, Boko Haram was the primary actor in 2,665 violent incidents in Nigeria causing 22,806 deaths. Additionally, during this same period, Boko Haram activity in nations surrounding Nigeria increased to 2,464 incidents and 8,353 corresponding deaths from 2015 to 2019. Also according to ICON, Boko Haram has been active in 28 out of 36 (78%) states in Nigeria, although within the past few years their activity has been highly concentrated in the northeast.

Fulani militants, likely due to the difficulty in identifying perpetrators and their only recent increase in organizational capacity, are not yet designated as a terrorist group. Regardless, Fulani militant wreak havoc all throughout northern and central Nigeria, and government initiatives to curb the violence have been remarkably unsuccessful. From the period of 2005 to 2009, Fulani militants were involved in 13 violence incidents causing 693 deaths;

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<sup>3</sup> Vincent Ufuoma, "Presidency replies UK Parliament report on religious genocide in Nigeria", *International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR)*, 19 June 2020.

<sup>4</sup> International Committee on Nigeria & International Organisation for Peace Building and Social Justice, *Nigeria's Silent Slaughter: Genocide in Nigeria and the Implications for the International Community*, July 2020.

from 2010 to 2014, 615 incidents causing 7,551 deaths; from 2015 to 2020, 1,289 incidents causing 9,733 deaths. These numbers, however, are relatively conservative. In a report released in May 2020 by Nigerian civil society organization International Society for Civil Liberties & Rule of Law<sup>5</sup> (Intersociety), it is predicted that "no fewer than 32,000 defenseless Christians [will] have been hacked to death by Nigeria's main Islamic Jihadists in the past eleven years or 2009 to [the] end of 2020."

(3) *"It is clear for all to see that there have, for generations in Nigeria, been tensions between our major religions, Christianity and Islam- and between herders and farmers- both for access to ever-decreasing arable and farmland due to a rapidly rising population, temperatures and desertification through global warming."* – Garba Shehu, Presidential Spokesman

While Presidential Spokesman Shehu does acknowledge that religious tensions exist within Nigeria, he fails to recognize that such religious tensions are in fact a major factor in the conflict occurring in the Middle Belt and Northern Nigeria. It is true that climate change and desertification in the North have pushed Fulani herders to move southward in conquest of grazing lands, and that such southward migration has forced herders and farmers into confrontation with each other; however, Mr. Shehu does not make it clear that Fulani herders are predominantly Muslim and that the farming communities in central Nigeria are primarily Christian, and that such an exclusion downplays the fact that resource-based tensions and religious tensions work in concert with each other to further exacerbate the situation. According to Prof. Joash Ojo Amupitan of Jos, Nigeria:

"For the purpose of this narrative, it is important to emphasize that the Fulani people were not originally part of the tribes in Nigeria. Following the 19<sup>th</sup> century jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio (a Fulani), the Hausa territories were conquered and the Sokoto Caliphate was established. It has been stated that the success of the jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio was one of the religious triumphalism that aimed at expanding the caliphate to other parts of Nigeria in 'the irrevocable bid to dip the Quran into the Atlantic Ocean in Lagos. The jihad was therefore a full blown Islamization agenda. Those that could not resist the jihad surrendered their ancestral land. The caliphate thereafter became a dominant force in the north.... The Nigeria's attainment of independence from colonial rule on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1960, and that of republican status in 1963 have brought no concomitant liberation of the country from ethno-religious crises or adequate economic and political development....Shortly after independence, Nigeria started experiencing series of violent conflicts motivated by political and ethno-religious sentiments."<sup>6</sup>

To ignore the history of jihad amongst radical Fulani as well as the history of ethno-religious conflict in the nation is to discredit the fact that religious tensions play a crucial role in the violence that occurs along Nigeria's Middle Belt. The evidence is irrefutable: survivors of Fulani militant attacks have reported that the Fulani assailants have exclaimed "Allah u Akbar," "destroy the infidels," "wipe out the infidels," as well as other incendiary

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<sup>5</sup> International Society for Civil Liberties & Rule of Law, *Special Report: 620 Christians Hacked to Death By Nigerian Jihadists in 4 Months And 15 Days Of 2020*, 14 May 2020.

<sup>6</sup> International Committee on Nigeria & International Organisation for Peace Building and Social Justice, *Nigeria's Silent Slaughter: Genocide in Nigeria and the Implications for the International Community*, July 2020, *supra note* 4.

and inflammatory language regarding the victims' religious affiliations. Others have reported that the attackers have brandished "Islamic flag[s]" during the attacks. According to APPG,

"Others submitted evidence to the APPG that before most attacks by Fulani herders, messages are sent to warn the communities of the impending attack. The response received by the APPG was that the content of the messages would usually be 'we have attacked (such and such a village) and you or your village will be next' or they would be threats such as 'your land or your blood.' It has been asserted that such warning signals are part of the rules of engagement in an Islamic jihad and thus reveal that these attacks are motivated by religious ideology."<sup>7</sup>

It is also impudent to ignore the plethora of statements made by community members confirming the horrific murders of their pastors, seminarians, parishioners, and church members.

(4) *"Exacerbating in recent times and focused within the Northern states- subject to vicious and criminal attacks by the terror group Boko Haram. Boko Haram have targeted Christians and churches specifically because they know it drives forward religious and land tensions already existent in the country. Similarly, they attack mosques and Muslims in order to issue the threat: radicalize, or become targets yourselves."* – Garba Shehu, Presidential Spokesperson

Despite that Spokesperson Shehu's statement is in direct response to the APPG report-whose main focus is to discuss the violence towards Nigerian Christians at the hands of Fulani militants- Shehu makes no specific mentions of this group of individuals. It is important to note that the Fulani ethnic group itself is not responsible for this violence, it is solely those individuals within the Fulani group that radicalize, acquire weapons, and target Christian farming communities; however, Spokesperson Shehu's reluctance to address the identity of the perpetrators is concerning.

Moreover, Spokesperson Shehu diverts the blame of virtually all of Nigeria's violence to Boko Haram, despite that they do not account for the increasing rate of attacks specifically along the Middle Belt attributed predominantly to Fulani militants. While it is commonly believed that Boko Haram does have some form of connection with the Fulani militants (i.e., weapons provision), it is reprehensible to ignore the ancient history of jihad specific to the Fulani group that makes them more susceptible – with or without Boko Haram influence and provocation - to radicalization than the average population. In fact, throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Fulani had established theocratic empires founded on jihad in Nigeria, Guinea, and Mali, the last of which (Mali) was inspired by the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate in Nigeria mentioned prior:

"Finally, historical reminiscences should not be ignored, although they should not be overestimated. In the Fulani imagination, the Macina Empire (of which Moptii was the capital) represents the golden age of the Centre. The heritage of this empire includes, in

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<sup>7</sup> All Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, *Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide? An Inquiry by the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief*, 15 June 2020, *supra* note 2.

addition to the social structures, specific to the community, a certain relationship to religion: the Fulani live and are perceived as supporters of a pure Islam, in the wake of the Sufi brotherhood quaddiriya, sensitive to a rigorous application of the precepts of the Koran. The jihad advocated by leading figures in Macina Empire, was different from that proclaimed by terrorists currently operating in Mali (which targeted other Muslims whose practices were not considered conforming with the founding text); Koufa's attitude towards the leading figures in the Macina Empire was ambiguous. Nevertheless, it appears that the Islam practiced by the Fulani is potentially compatible with certain aspects of the Salafism that jihadist groups regularly claim to be their own."<sup>8</sup>

To claim that Boko Haram is responsible for the increase of "religious and land tensions" ignores that such religious tensions have long existed in the region and throughout the Sahel, and that it is possible Fulani militants' violent motivations draw more from their own ethnic group's history than from Boko Haram encouragement and incitement. While it is possible that these two groups may have some connections to each other in terms of ideology, weapons acquisition, etc., it is important to address Fulani militant responsibility and propensity to jihad as other imperative factors that- perhaps combined with Boko Haram cooperation- increase the likelihood of Fulani radicalization and violence.

Also important to mention is that, even though there are many reports claiming that Boko Haram advanced weaponry is making its way into the supplies of Fulani militants, a sentiment of Islamic radicalization, hatred of 'apostates' and infidels', or responsibility to jihad would seemingly be necessary for Fulani militants to actually employ such weaponry and violent tactics against other human beings.

(5) *"In the months and years ahead, our President who is Muslim and our Vice President who is an evangelical Christian pastor are irrevocably committed to addressing these multiple and long-term challenges for today's and future generations."* - Garba Shehu, Presidential Spokesman

President Buhari has made a few public condemnations of Islamic militant violence against Nigerian Christians. In 2015, Buhari called the murder of 150 citizens a "heinous atrocity."<sup>9</sup> He referred to the 2016 accusation of blasphemy and subsequent murder of Nigerian student as "barbaric and unacceptable."<sup>10</sup> In 2018, Buhari condemned Fulani militant violence against and killings of predominantly Christians, claiming that the incidents were a "mindless massacre."<sup>11</sup> In 2020, when ISWAP militants murdered five aid workers- some of whom were Christian- Buhari made a promise to "wipe out the remaining vestiges" of the group and its parent group Boko Haram.<sup>12</sup> Buhari has made endless promises to end ethnic and religious violence in Nigeria since he assumed office. According to International Christian Concern:

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<sup>8</sup> Boukary Sangare, "Fulani people and Jihadism in Sahel and West African countries", *Foundation pour la Recherche Stratégique*, 8 February 2019.

<sup>9</sup> BBC News, "Nigeria President Buhari condemns Boko Haram's 'heinous' attacks", 3 July 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Conor Gaffey, "Nigeria's Buhari Condemns 'Blasphemy' Killings in Zamfara", *Newsweek*, 23 August 2016.

<sup>11</sup> World Watch Monitor, "Buhari does not stop Fulani because they are his 'kith and kin'"- *Christian Association of Nigeria*", 2 August 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Uriah, "Five aid workers killed in Nigeria; president blames Boko Haram", *United Press International*, 23 July 2020.

"For years, the Nigerian government has refused to take any concrete action to fulfill its constitutional mandate to protect their citizens and enforce the rule of law and little has been done in terms of policy to counter the violence and protect its Christian communities. President Buhari and his administration have made vague statements regarding the ongoing attacks but he has done nothing to provide security during his first and now second term. His inactivity has led to an impression of complicity as he continually turns a blind eye to the growing violence."<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, President Buhari cannot claim to champion religious freedom and spearhead the campaign to eradicate such violence when he has made numerous statements downplaying the incidents and ignoring their complexities. In 2018, during President Buhari's meeting with U.S. President Trump, Buhari refuses to address the increasingly looming religious tensions that have characterized Fulani militant attacks against predominantly Christian farming communities, deflecting: "The problem of cattle herders is a very long historical problem."<sup>14</sup> He then does not elaborate on the conflict further than stating the concern over the use of illicit weapons among militant groups. Later that same year, President Buhari made the following written statement:

*"Unfortunately, those who wish us all to walk apart have recently found another focus for their efforts: the tragic clashes between nomadic herdsman and settled farmers in the central regions of Nigeria. For generations, herders have driven their cattle from the north to the centre of our country; they tend to be predominantly Muslim, although not exclusively. The farmers, in certain areas of central Nigeria, are predominantly Christian. The causes of this conflict are not religious or theological, but temporal. At the heart of this discord is access to rural land, exacerbated both by climate change and population growth. Sadly, there are some who seek to play fast and loose and so make others believe that these are not the facts. When religion is claimed as the cause – and by those who know that it is not – it only makes finding a resolution more difficult."<sup>15</sup>*

How is it possible or prudent to admit that the attackers and victims are from distinctly different religions and then go on to say that religion plays no part in the violence? Not just the APPG, but countless other non-governmental organizations have drawn attention to the casualty statistics which show that Christian deaths as a result of Islamic militancy far outweigh Muslim deaths from rare reprisal attacks. Survivors have testified that their attackers have made statements variant of "Allahu Akbar, we have killed infidel, we need to kill more"<sup>16</sup> and "We must wipe out these infidel Christians today."<sup>17</sup> Churches are set ablaze, pastors and seminaries are bludgeoned and slaughtered, Christian women and girls are raped, and it is impossible that such savagery comes as a result of simply "climate change and population growth." Land disputes cannot brew such a deep-seated hatred and justification necessary for attackers to dehumanize and brutally murder tens of Christian

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<sup>13</sup> International Christian Concern, "[Nigeria's Persecution Problem Must be Addressed](#)", *Persecution.org*, 9 April 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Ewelina Ochab, "[Trump May Not Be Wrong On the Fulani Herdsmen Crisis in Nigeria](#)", *Forbes*, 4 May 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Church Times, "[Don't politicise religion in Nigeria: Muslims and Christians can flourish together, says President Muhammadu Buhari](#)", 30 November 2018.

<sup>16</sup> World Watch Monitor, "[Nigeria: Violence continues but government in denial, church leaders say](#)", 25 July 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Morning Star News, "[Islamic Extremists Kill at Least 10 Christians in Plateau State, Nigeria](#)", 23 September 2014.

men, women, and children per attack. Any 'solution' that does not address religious differences and tensions- along with the various other interwoven determinants- that are evident will fail to completely erase this bloodshed and bring peace and consolation to the people of Nigeria.

(6) *"Continuing and increasing Nigeria's efforts alongside our allies to fully defeat and finally finish Boko Haram, in order to bring security to the north of the country." - Garba Shehu, Presidential Spokesman*

One major point of contention among human rights advocates regards the Nigerian government's favoritism towards rehabilitating and protecting former Boko Haram members who have since 'de-radicalized' and simultaneously disregarding the state of hopelessness that has been recorded among Nigerian military- who are often at the forefront of tackling Boko Haram insurgency. Since 2016, Operation Safe Corridor has been a "disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) strategy" for former Boko Haram militants, but has been met with some controversy. According to Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Operation Safe Corridor

"...lacks a clear reintegration strategy. In part because politicians fear being seen as lenient toward extremist groups, the government has done little to build popular support for the scheme or clarify the misconceptions surrounding it. As a result, many people view Operation Safe Corridor with frustration- they are skeptical that those who surrender are truly repentant, and resent that the government provides assistance to former insurgents while neglecting the victims of the conflict. Fears of community retribution have repeatedly delayed plans to release the class of ninety-six individuals who have completed the program."<sup>18</sup>

It is true that Operation Safe Corridor is fraught with misconceptions that it is a blanket amnesty program- by no means is this the case; however, there are so many issues with the program itself that decrease the credibility and effectiveness of the entire Operation: (1) there is no specific criteria to determine whether an alleged former Boko Haram militant is eligible for rehabilitation; (2) the re-radicalization risk assessment component of the Operation has no clear criteria to distinguish between low-risk and high-risk former Boko Haram insurgents, which poses the risk that potentially dangerous individuals may be classified as low-risk; (3) it is impossible to confirm whether an alleged former Boko Haram members has truly 'repented' and condemned the group and its ideology; (4) generalized deradicalization programs do not account for the fact that radicalization tends to be individualized, and therefore creates the danger that generalized deradicalization is unsuccessful; (5) "Many recognize the long-term need for reintegration but feel that it is too soon for former fighters to return. They demand a longer rehabilitation process, and greater support for the affected communities as a whole. Others find it hard to envision living side-by-side with those who killed their relatives or destroyed their village, particularly as long as the needs of victims are left unmet."

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<sup>18</sup> Saskia Brechenmacher, "[Achieving Peace in Northeast Nigeria: The Reintegration Challenge](#)", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 5 September 2018.

The last shortcoming listed in the above paragraph is the most concerning. The Nigerian government has instituted this Operation Safe Corridor for rehabilitation of allegedly former Boko Haram members, but has not implemented a similar rehabilitation program for victim communities that focuses on therapy, empowerment, conflict resolution, restitution of land and homes, and other support necessary for victims to return to a state of safety and security. According to Bulama Bukarti:

"This program may be the best path to peace, but its potentially fraught nature is clear. Deradicalization of former Boko Haram militants will not succeed if the broader contours of the conflict are not dealt with. Specifically, a wider justice and reconciliation package-one that convinces, prepares, and equips communities to receive former fighters- and sustained pressure from the military are needed."<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, in addition to prioritizing former militant rehabilitation and reconciliation over victim rehabilitation and reparation, the government has also neglected the military, who has been leading the initiative to oust Boko Haram activity throughout the nation. According to Sahara Reporters, over 350 Nigerian soldiers formerly stationed in the North-East with orders to tackle Boko Haram wrote a letter in early July 2020 to the Nigerian Chief of Army Staff Tukur Buratai in which they request retirement, citing "loss of interest."<sup>20</sup> This collective resignation comes amidst reports that Nigerian military troops have become distraught over deaths among the ranks due to Boko Haram violence, "lack of a robust intelligence apparatus and also lack of equipment," "poor welfare for them and their families," embezzlement of troop salaries by military superiors, and "cases of mutiny resulting in sporadic shooting and attempted lynching of senior officers by junior officers," according to Premium Times Nigeria.<sup>21</sup>

(7) *"Continuing to seek, negotiate for, and secure the return of all those held hostage and in captivity by the terrorists, regardless of the religious faith or belief. Uniting our nation through dialogue organised around respect for difference in religion. Such a programme is already underway under the leadership of the Vice President, Pastor Yemi Osinbajo."* - Garba Shehu, *Presidential Spokesman*

In addition to the points made in the above section regarding claim (5), it should be noted that, despite the efforts of negotiation to release prisoners in Boko Haram and terrorist captivity, releases are few and far between. During the mass abduction of 110 Nigerian schoolgirls in February 2018 from their boarding school, 104 were returned by Boko Haram not long after their initial capture, save for the deaths of 5 girls and the continued detention of one young girl, Leah Sharibu.

Leah Sharibu, who is Christian, continues to remain in Boko Haram captivity over two years since her original abduction. It has been rumored that she became pregnant by one of her captors and gave birth earlier this year, though these reports have not been confirmed. Leah's schoolmates who were released have informed her family as well as media outlets

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<sup>19</sup> Bulama Bukarti, "Making Peace with Enemies: Nigeria's Reintegration of Boko Haram Fighters", *War on the Rocks*, 27 March 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Sahara Reporters, "356 Nigerian Soldiers Fighting Boko Haram Resign, Cite 'Loss of Interest'", 12 July 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Premium Times Nigeria, "Reps to Investigate mass resignation in Nigerian Army", 14 July 2020.

that Boko Haram leaders continuously assured Leah that if she were to renounce Christianity and return to Islam, she would be released; however, Leah has refused these demands and remained a devout Christian and, as a result, has still not been released.

Earlier in the decade, in 2014, 276 Nigerian schoolgirls were kidnapped from their school in Chibok- 57 girls escaped during transport to a Boko Haram base, and the other 219 were forcibly transferred to captivity. Over six years since this abduction, 112 victims are still missing. According to Al Jazeera, though negotiation on part of the government has secured the release of 107 of the captive schoolgirls, very little further action has transpired on behalf of the government. Enock Mark, the mother of one of the abducted girls, states:

"They [the government] are not talking about our girls anymore. They are acting as if they are happy about what happened to us. We have lost hope in the government helping us. They have not shown interest in ensuring that our daughters are found. It looks like it was done intentionally. They don't care about us anymore. We won't give up. Even in a hundred years, we will keep believing that our daughters will return home. Until we all die, we don't stop believing that our daughters will come back."<sup>22</sup>

These parents' desperation and grief, as well as distrust in the government's ability to bring their girls home, has caused them to seek action from the international stage, especially the United States. Among the religious freedom community in the United States, Leah Sharibu and the Chibok kidnapping remain at the forefront of conversations regarding Nigeria. In June 2019, Rebecca Sharibu, mother of Leah, visited Washington, D.C. to give a statement at The Heritage Foundation, appealing to the United States to take action to safeguard the return of Leah Sharibu to her home in family. Her translator explains:

"We stand here with Rebecca Sharibu, the mother of Leah Sharibu. She was abducted on the 19<sup>th</sup> of February, and she's still in captivity. We have tried the best that we could to get the attention of our federal government, and even the state government and the local governments, to ensure that Leah is released, but up until today there has been no release and she is still in captivity. October last year we held a press conference calling on the federal government to please do their very best to ensure that Leah is released, because we have never had any government official visit the parents to [converse] with them and to tell them anything concerning their daughter since when she was abducted alongside over 110 girls. After the conference we were able to get President Buhari to speak to her [Rebecca] on the phone, because we got the Plateau State governor to help us to call him....He was able to speak to her and promise that Leah Sharibu will be released soon because he is doing the very best to make sure that she is released, because the other girls who are all Muslim girls were released and the only reason why Leah was kept back was because she refused to renounce her faith when she was told to renounce her faith and recite the Kalima Shahadat. Kalima Shahadat means the Islamic faith creed, and she refused to do that, and that was the only reason that she was kept back. And so, since October, when the president spoke to her [Rebecca], we have not heard anything from the government. After two weeks of the president speaking to her we got the attention of the three ministers that he sent to Dapchi, which is the first official government people that came to see them in Dapchi, but

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<sup>22</sup> Fidelis Mbah, "[Nigeria's Chibok schoolgirls: Five years on, 112 still missing](#)", *Al Jazeera*, 14 April 2019.

after that one we never heard anything again....That is why we are here- and what she [Rebecca] said in the beginning- is to plead with your government to please pressure our government, because our government seems unable to secure her release. And we are pleading with you to please call on our government or to step in and do something....Whatever it takes, she should be released. She should be brought back home. Our government should be held responsible. Boko Haram has been raging all over the North and East."<sup>23</sup>

(8) *"Addressing, through joint Federal and State Governments programmes, access to arable farmland – with land mandated both for farmers and herders. The Federal Government will issue detailed measures regarding this plan and its rollout in the coming weeks."* - Garba Shehu, Presidential Spokesman

Presidential Spokesman Shehu, earlier in his statement, does mention- albeit briefly and dismissively- that there is a religious component to the violence taking place in the Middle Belt, the main course of action he proposes addresses only the economic dimensions of the conflict, thus discrediting the fact that the causes of the conflict are multidimensional and therefore also require a multidimensional response.

This plan of action likely is to address the failure of the 2017 Anti-Grazing Laws which, contrary to the expectations of the federal and local governments, actually further exacerbated the conflict. Four Nigerian states implemented these laws, which aimed at limiting the areas reserved for grazing and prohibiting herders from grazing their cattle on designated farmland, and they were surprised to see that the violence continued unmitigated and even had some detrimental secondary effects:

"Experts on the conflict predicted that the law was more likely to inflame violence than resolve it, and they were right: Benue saw more fatalities than any other state this year, according to the Amnesty International report. Mohammed Bello Turkur, an Abuja-based lawyer for the Confederation of Traditional Herders, a pastoralist advocacy group, says the anti-grazing laws made farmers and pastoralists feel empowered to take the law into their own hands. Raleigh from ACLED adds that some state governments' aggressive approach to regulating land has tended to erode the power of traditional local chiefs, who historically managed the allocation of land."<sup>24</sup>

However, these legislatures do not consider that, in addition to farmers' homes and croplands being razed and destroyed, churches have been demolished and multiple priests killed, and that laws regarding land distribution will not account for this trend of increasing religious components and tensions. In May 2018, a time period following the implementation of anti-grazing laws that was fraught with violence, Father Joseph Gor and Father Felix Tyolaha were murdered along with 15 parishioners by suspected Fulani militants:

"The assailants took money, valuables and communion wine. They burnt a couple of shops but left most of the village untouched, suggesting the attackers did not aim to take over

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<sup>23</sup> The Heritage Foundation, [Insecurity in Nigeria: Eyewitnesses Speak \[event page/YouTube\]](#), 11 June 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Tim McDonnell, ["Herders Vs. Farmers: A Deadly Year In Nigeria"](#), *NPR WAMU* 88.5, 17 December 2018.

land and deter villages from coming back. They also did not return with cattle as might have been expected."<sup>25</sup>

Additionally, Father Amos Mbachie of St Theresa Parish in Makurdi, Benue state, explained that he has seen firsthand that these suspected Fulani militants burn churches and specifically target priests, and that the first plans of actions following their attacks is to start erecting mosques in place of the demolished church buildings. According to scholar Kodili Henry Chukwuman:

"Instructively, the federal government have, instead, offered a range of statements-including policies on cattle grazing and settlements- which seeks to disprove definitions of the conflict along ethnoreligious lines (Fulani-north-Muslim against the Christian-southern Others)."

If the Nigerian government chooses only to address the economic and land-based tensions that play a role in aggravating the violence and ignore the increasingly overarching religious tensions, they can expect that (1) the violence will continue unmitigated and perhaps take on increasingly religious dimensions in the potential absence of economic dimensions, and that (2) religious minority communities will become even more so disenfranchised and disillusioned due to lack of representation and resolution.

Presidential Spokesman Shehu assures that a plan of action on land distribution will be detailed comprehensive, and uniform throughout Nigeria, but says only of religious tensions in the previous paragraph that "uniting our nation through dialogue organised around respect for difference in religion. Such a programme is already underway...." However, the truth is that, in Nigeria, interfaith dialogue has historically been spearheaded by grassroots organizations rather than influential government leaders. The Nigerian Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and the Interfaith Dialogue Forum for Peace (IDFP) are the two most prominent dialogue organizations that meet regularly, are successful in fostering peace between Nigeria's religious communities, and are independent from government involvement, support, and promotion.

(9) *"Countering fake news- particularly on social and digital media- by working with the non-partisan stakeholder community, the National Broadcasting Commission and social media platforms themselves, to address the proliferation of false and inflammatory commentary."* - Garba Shehu, Presidential Spokesman

While we recognize that fake news and exaggerated stories regarding violence in Nigeria has circulated and inherently caused more difficulties among the Nigeria public and police forces in recognizing which Fulani militant attacks are real and which ones are fabricated, we are concerned about the introduction of the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill 2019, which has the potential to further exacerbate the situation.

The Bill, more commonly referred to generally as the Social Media Bill, stipulates a N200,000-300,000 fine and up to three years imprisonment for individuals convicted of transmission of false electronic information "prejudicial to the security of Nigeria," that

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<sup>25</sup> BBC News, ["How Nigeria's cattle war is fuelling religious tension"](#), 9 May 2018.

"incite[s] feelings of enmity, hatred directed to a person or ill-will between different groups," or "diminish[es] public confidence in the performance of any duty or function of, or in the exercise of any power by the Government."<sup>26</sup>

This bill inherently violates and threatens Nigerian citizens' right to free speech, and it presents the danger that individuals who unintentionally circulate false information despite being unaware of false and exaggerated material can be arrested despite their lack of awareness and intentionality. Moreover, it is extremely difficult for both the Nigerian public and Nigerian police forces to distinguish between true and false articles and information. This increases the likelihood that (1) accurate information and articles may be deleted on suspicion of falsehood, (2) accurate information and articles may be deleted according to a broad interpretation of "prejudicial," and (3) accurate information and articles may be deleted because officials don't want Nigeria to be portrayed negatively via the global media. According to Techpoint Africa:

"The bill gives law enforcement agents the power to arrest those who are found guilty of spreading false information online. While this might be a good thing, any user of the internet could fall on the wrong side of the proposed bill seeing as 'falsehood' or 'truth' have relative meanings. Targeting these institutions/individuals means access to information could be either controlled/doctored by the government at best, or simply non-existent at worst. Now you might be a model citizen who may neither lie nor cause anyone harm, but the broad spectrum of persons/activities the bill could affect means that anyone might be deprived access to the Internet as a result of the actions of another."<sup>27</sup>

(10) *"The President and Government have and will at all times work with those- both within and without Nigeria- with a concern for the rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. In this regard, we look forward to welcoming members of the All-Party Parliamentary group to our country to see for themselves the work that is going on to promote these fundamental rights of our citizens."*

It seems imprudent that we believe in this assertion of Nigerian government cooperation with international organization visits and reporting when domestic human rights advocates and journalists have repeatedly been detained by Nigerian officials. Omoyele Sowore, a well-known human rights reporter and publisher of *Sahara Reporters*, was detained in August 2019 in response to his "organization of a peaceful protest movement calling for good governance, known under the name of #RevolutionNow."<sup>28</sup> Sowore was detained under the Terrorism Act. Another individual, Jones Abiri, was a publisher for *The Weekly Source* newspaper and was detained for his internet advocacy. According to Al Jazeera:

"Finally, in August 2018, after local journalists and rights groups repeatedly raised his case with officials, Abiri was brought to a magistrate's court in Abuja, Nigeria's capital, and

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<sup>26</sup> *Protection From Internet Falsehoods And Manipulation And Other Related Matters Bill 2019*, sponsored by Senator Muhammad Sani Musa.

<sup>27</sup> Emmanuel Paul, *"Everything you need to know about Nigeria's Social Media Bill and what you can do about it"*, Techpoint Africa, 28 November 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Pen International, *"Nigeria: Journalist detained as authorities clampdown on freedom of expression"*, 4 December 2019,

charged with allegedly demanding payments from oil companies. The government maintained he was a militant, but no evidence was ever presented and the case was thrown out over a jurisdictional issue. A separate court at the time ordered the Nigerian government to compensate Abiri 10.5 million naira (\$29,000) for violation of his constitutional rights. They have yet to pay."<sup>29</sup> Though Abiri was released, re-arrested, and subsequently released on bail again, his story is evidence that the Nigerian government will go to great lengths- even making false accusations- to silence human rights journalists and media outlets.

Cross River Watch publisher Agba Jalingo was detained by Nigerian officials in July 2019 following the website's publishing of a report "questioning the whereabouts of N500m approved for the establishment of Cross River State Microfinance Bank" and implying the probability of corruption of the state's government.<sup>30</sup> Jalingo was detained without formal charges, allegedly tortured and mistreated during his time in prison, and his request for bail was repeatedly rejected until February 2020.

Should the Nigerian government promise future collaboration with international reporting mechanisms regarding the domestic situation of human rights and religious freedom, it must cease the practice of arbitrarily and prolonged detention of reporters and publishers of critical content that reaches international audiences and is imperative to global understanding of the Nigerian situation.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

With regards to the data we have presented in sections above to respond to Presidential spokesman Shehu's statement rejecting the APPG's report *Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?*, we make the following recommendations to the government of Nigeria:

1. Respect the rule of law and abide by the Nigerian constitution, especially its federal character, which urges fair representation in appointments to public institutions to reflect the linguistic, ethnic, religious, and geographic diversity of the nation.
2. Publicly promote ethnic and religious tolerance and pluralism.
3. Acknowledge the multi-dimensional causes of ethnic and religious tensions in Nigeria's Middle Belt and northern region between predominantly Fulani Muslim militants and predominantly Christian farming communities.
4. Develop comprehensive plans and policies to prevent violence against Nigerian Christians and religious minorities.
5. Publicly condemn all violence against religious communities, and investigate and prosecute all perpetrators of such violence.
6. Redirect more resources to provide aid, therapy, and security to victims of religious or ethnic violence and displacement.

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<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Rozen, "[The secret prosecution of Nigerian journalist Jones Abiri](#)", *Al Jazeera*, 10 December 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Sahara Reporters, "[Timeline of Agba Jalingo's Arrest, Detention](#)", 17 February 2020.

7. Permit domestic and international reporting on human rights and religious freedom violations and protect journalists' rights to freedom of expression.
8. Ensure accountability and prosecution for massacres, destruction of homes and churches, and attacks committed against Christian communities by Fulani militants.

**Authoring Organization**

**And Original Signature:**

Jubilee Campaign

**Organizations:**

Advocates International

All Pro Pastors International

Christian Solidarity International

Christ's Mandate for Missions

Coptic Solidarity

European Centre for Law & Justice

Mission Africa International

International Christian Concern

International Committee on Nigeria

Jubilee Campaign

Leah Foundation

REDEEM!

Shai Fund

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Kyle Abts, Director, International Committee on Nigeria