

**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Hearing
on
CONFLICT AND KILLINGS IN NIGERIA'S MIDDLE BELT**

December 17, 2020 – 1:00 p.m.

2172 Rayburn House Office Building and virtual via Cisco WebEx

**Statement of Annigje J. Buwalda
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The facts are incontrovertible that the standards of crimes against humanity and genocide are increasingly being met on a daily basis in certain middle belt and in certain northern states of Nigeria. Islamic militant groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have wreaked havoc for years, with violence against civilians increasing exponentially over the past decade. My organization, Jubilee Campaign, recently submitted a Brief to the International Criminal Court in which we articulate why we believe that genocidal acts are occurring nearly on a daily basis in parts of Nigeria.

My organization, Jubilee Campaign, welcomes the State Department's designation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern and the International Criminal Court's decision to open a formal investigation into the situation of crimes against humanity in Nigeria, both decisions occurring within the past two weeks. However, we would additionally ask that more consideration be proffered to a relevant and imminent threat in the region: the rising frequency of deadly midnight attacks on predominantly Christian farming communities in Nigeria, which are carried out by groups of heavily-armed radical Islamist Fulani militants.

Jubilee Campaign joins NGOs around the world in the continuous call for international efforts to end the violence in Nigeria and hold all perpetrators to account, which must include anyone committing acts of violence. What we are witnessing right now is a massive humanitarian crisis, one that has the potential to leave a lasting stain on all of humanity. Agnes Callamard, the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, accurately depicted the following findings after her September 2019 visit to Nigeria:

“The warning signs are flashing bright red: increased numbers of attacks and killings over the last five years with a few notable exceptions; increased criminality and spreading insecurity; widespread failure by the federal authorities to investigate and hold perpetrators to account, even for mass killings; a lack of public trust and confidence in the judicial institutions and State institutions more generally; high levels of resentment and grievances within and between communities; toxic ethno-religious narratives and ‘extremist’ ideologies – characterized by dehumanization of the ‘others’ and denial of the legitimacy of the others’ claims; a generalized break down of the rule of law, with particularly acute consequences for the most vulnerable and impoverished populations of Nigeria.”

Her description and findings continue to reflect the current conditions in the middle belt of Nigeria.

Since 2001, over 60,000 Nigerian civilians have died in the Middle Belt conflict violence, and, according to the Global Terrorism Index, between 2012 and 2016, Fulani extremist militants killed over 2,500 Nigerians. Of course, acquiring perfectly accurate casualty figures remains difficult due to the formidable challenges of evidence gathering within the impacted areas. However, I would like to briefly lay out some of the most pertinent data over the past ten years:

In 2013, the International Criminal Court Office of the Prosecutor released its Article 5 report in which they concluded that there was **insufficient** evidence to investigate crimes against humanity by Fulani militants in Nigeria.

By 2014, Nigeria had experienced a 300% increase in terrorist activity since the previous year. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) reported that in 2014, Fulani militant attacks resulted in 1,376 deaths. In just a year, Fulani militants went from being “never previously featured among the most deadly terrorist groups” to being recognized as “the fourth most deadly terrorist group of 2014” by the Institute for Economics and Peace.

In March 2015, Fulani militants engaged in the 17th worst terrorist attack in the world for that year, when they attacked the predominantly Christian Egba village in Benue State, killing 82.

By 2016, Fulani militants were responsible for more Nigerian civilian deaths than Boko Haram. From February 22nd to 26th, Fulani militants pillaged the predominantly Christian Agatu community in Benue State and killed over 300 men, women, and children.

In 2018, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center observed that “the conflict in the Middle Belt was six times deadlier in 2018 than the Boko Haram insurgency, with over 1,300 people killed in the first half of the year alone.” Open Doors reported that from November 2017 to October 2018, approximately 3,731 Nigerian Christians were killed by both Boko Haram and Fulani militants.

In 2020, the data became even more staggering. In May, a local Nigerian NGO by the name of International Society for Civil Liberties & Rule of Law released a report stating that “Jihadist Fulani Herdsmen accounted for 6,000 Christian deaths between Jan[uary] 2009 and Dec[ember] 2014, a period of six years.... And from Jan[uary] 2015 to Dec[ember] 2020, the Jihadist Fulani militants must have accounted for an additional 9,000 Christian deaths or 1,500 per year.”

Also in 2020, the International Committee on Nigeria [ICON] released its report *Nigeria's Silent Slaughter*, in which they revealed their calculations based upon primary sources on the ground that, since 2015, Fulani militant attacks are exponentially increasing: between 2010 and 2014, Fulani militants conducted 615 separate attacks killing 7,551 Nigerian individuals, and between 2015 and 2020, they conducted 1,289 attacks causing 9,733 casualties.

Violent Fulani militants have also been recorded taking part in sexual violence as well. In November 2018, Fulani militants shot and killed a woman's husband after he attempted to stop them from raping his wife. In that same month, a similar incident left one woman dead from machete wounds after she attempted to defend herself from being raped. Tens of more similar incidents have placed Nigeria's women at an even greater level of vulnerability.

As much as these horrifying numbers display the extent of the violence and travesty perpetrated by radical Fulani militants, the personal testimonies and stories of victims from the Nigerian Christian farming communities offer a more emotional insight into the worsening situation. Baroness Caroline Cox based in the U.K. gathered these valuable stories in her report *Your Land or Your Blood: The escalating persecution and displacement of Christians in northern and central Nigeria*. Below are just two of the testimonies:

35-year-old Nigerian Christian survivor Veronica John: “It was early on a Monday morning when Fulani came. I heard commotion outside, so I woke up the children and put the baby on my back. We tried to run. But we were surrounded. It was an ambush. They shot me. I raised my arm, pleading for mercy. Another man attacked me with a machete twice, once to the neck and once to my hand. I lost consciousness. When I woke up, I saw my daughter on [the] ground – she was dead – with my chopped finger in her mouth. My brother's ten-year-old daughter was also dead.”

45-year-old Abd Zakkaa: “At first, the Fulani came to rustle. But then the kidnappings began. My family slept in the bushes to avoid the attacks, which we feared could happen at any moment. When the attack finally came, I was in Church. I heard screaming and came outside to gunshots. The Fulani were dressed in black. They called us to go towards them. I survived but my mother-in-law and sister-in-law were killed with guns and machetes. I lost my mind. I am so insecure and full of fear that I have sent four of my children to live with relatives in Abuja and one of my children with relatives elsewhere. Only me and my

husband remain. Our home is destroyed. Nothing survived. We have to beg for food. We only survive thanks to other people's donations.” These stories illustrate all too vividly the plight of the victims, and Jubilee Campaign believes that many of their communities have suffered genocide, as perpetrated by both Boko Haram and by Fulani militant groups.

Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court explains that crimes against humanity have occurred if *any* of the following acts were committed. Groups of Fulani militants have engaged in virtually *every* one of the following acts: (a) murder; (b) extermination; (c) deportation or forcible transfer of population; (d) torture; (e) rape; (f) persecution against a group on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender or other grounds; (g) enforced disappearance of persons; and (h) other inhumane acts. Similarly, the standards of genocide have all been met as well, including “killing members of the group”, “causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;” and “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.” Now is certainly not the time for the international community to waiver in holding perpetrators of crimes against humanity and genocide accountable to their atrocities. This is especially the case when human rights and religious freedom organizations have raised their concerns about the worsening situation in Nigeria.

Jubilee Campaign submits for the record our detailed Brief that we provided to the International Criminal court and in which we argue that genocide has taken place in the middle belt of Nigeria. It is our finding that Boko Haram and Fulani militants are committing acts of genocide. Fulani militants pose a mortal threat to the predominantly Christian farming tribes in the Middle Belt and surrounding states, but the Nigerian government is failing both to protect the victims of Fulani militant violence and to bring the perpetrators to justice according to its duty. As a member of the Genocide Convention, it is time for the United States to place pressure on Nigeria to end the impunity and offer security to the victims in communities in Nigeria vulnerable to Fulani militant attacks and violence.

Historically, we have made very consistent recommendations on what actions should be taken both domestically in Nigeria as well as by the international community to eliminate religious intolerance and violence. Jubilee Campaign publicly calls on the Federal Republic of Nigeria to:

1. Develop a comprehensive plan and/or policy to address and eradicate the violence against Nigerian Christians at the hands of Islamic jihadist members of Boko Haram and Fulani militants.
2. Publicly condemn all savage acts of violence against religious communities, and identify, investigate, and prosecute – with transparency measures – all perpetrators of such violent intolerance, including perpetrators on both sides of the conflict.
3. Establish an official medium of reporting timely, accurate, and up to date information on incidences of violent attacks for verification, modeled similarly to the Nigeria Center for Disease Control’s role in providing updated COVID-19 statistics.

In addition to these recommendations, we also respectfully recommend that the United States designate a Special Envoy to Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin Region for consistent monitoring of the situation and ethno-religious tensions as well as for collaboration with local organizations on data collection and conflict de-escalation.

Lastly, we urge the international community – of advocates, activists, scholars, - to encourage the establishment of a United Nations Commission of Inquiry to focus on examining the atrocities that have taken place in Nigeria, and ensure that impunity ends. We urge all countries to publicly support the International Criminal Court’s recent decision to advance its investigation on Nigeria from the preliminary stage to a full-scale, thorough investigation which will be unfolding in the coming years.

The US State Department’s 2018 Integrated Country Strategy on Nigeria asserts that “Nigeria is the single most important strategic partner for the United States in sub-Saharan Africa” and that “our priorities in Nigeria are to support democratic governance, economic growth, and peace building, while providing critical life-saving assistance through humanitarian operations and health interventions.” The exacerbating situation in the Middle Belt intersects upon each of these American initiatives, and it is therefore critical we continue encouraging the Nigerian government to take matters into their own hands to eradicate the conflict and forge peace in the region, not just for the security and future of their own nation, but also for Nigeria’s relationship with the United States and reputation at international stages.

Thank you for your kind attention.