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NIGERIA: State Department Should Redesignate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern

WASHINGTON, D.C., 26 AUGUST 2021 – The deadline for the State Department’s designation of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) is swiftly approaching, and it was with great urgency that we – along with 39 other human rights and religious freedom NGOs – [made a final plea](#) to Secretary of State Antony Blinken to designate Nigeria as a CPC as it has indisputably “engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom”. Such a designation would be a strategic opening by which we can leverage diplomatic pressure against the Nigerian government to address its religious freedom violations.

Radical Islamist terrorists active in Northeastern Nigeria continue to viciously attack and kill Christian and Muslims alike who reject extremist ideology, and recent studies reveal that no fewer than 3,462 Christians have been murdered for faith-related reasons in 2021 so far. Simultaneously, militant groups routinely abduct tens to hundreds of students from schools across the nation, most recently in Kaduna, Kagara, Zamfara, and Benue States; UNICEF estimates that over 1,120 schools have been temporarily closed in northwestern Nigeria as they are unable to offer security to their young students. Those who are kidnapped could be forced into sexual slavery or recruited as child soldiers for the militant groups.

Shariah law and blasphemy laws alike have been applied to arrest numerous individuals on accusations of insulting Islam or the Prophet; two religious prisoners of conscience, Mubarak Bala and Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, are currently in detention in Kano State.

However, religious minorities alone are not exclusively targeted for government repression and violence. The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) has engaged in policy brutality on multiple occasions, and those who have peacefully protested against such violence have been swiftly shot at and killed. On 20 October 2020, Nigerian security forces opened fire against protesters at Lekki toll gate in Lagos State, killing at least 12 demonstrators and injuring others. All the while, state actors attempted to minimize the

death statistics of individuals who were murdered for simply exercising their rights of expression and assembly.

Our fear that the situation in Nigeria has reached a disastrous breaking point is shared by human rights activists and respected world leaders. In September 2019, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions Agnes Callamard expressed her concern that Nigeria has become an “injustice pressure cooker”. On 16 August 2021, Baroness Caroline Cox of Queensbury along with 15 other noteworthy MPs, Lords, Bishops, Archbishops, and NGO presidents sent a letter to MP James Duddridge, Minister of Africa, FCDO, urging “the UK Government to acknowledge the scale of ethno-religious violence” in Nigeria as well as to “press the Nigerian Government to address this violence swiftly, and to ensure protection, justice and recompense for victims of all ethnicities without bias.”

The United States, pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, has the duty to “condemn violations of religious freedom, and to promote, and to assist other governments in the promotion of, the fundamental right to freedom of religion.” Part of this obligation designating nations whose governments have “engaged in or tolerated systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom” as CPCs. Designating Nigeria as a CPC is the necessary first step in holding the government accountable; not only does a CPC designation send a clear message to that the United States will not stand by and continue to watch these abuses, but it also gives the US government the power to use a wide range of diplomatic and economic tools to make it costly for Nigeria to allow religious persecution to continue unabated.

Jubilee Campaign is a non-profit organization which promotes the human rights and religious liberty of ethnic and faith minorities in the most oppressive countries. We assist individuals seeking asylum from religious persecution as well as promote the care and well-being of larger groups of refugees fleeing persecution.