



Rejoinder from Jubilee Campaign to Response by the [Nigerian] Presidency to the Statement Made by Bishop Kukah Before the United States Congress

Jubilee Campaign promotes the human rights and religious liberty of ethnic and religious minorities; advocates for the release of prisoners of conscience imprisoned on account of their faith; assists refugees fleeing religious-based persecution; and protects and promotes the dignity and safety of children from bodily harm and sexual exploitation. Jubilee Campaign holds special consultative status with ECOSOC at the United Nations.

I. Executive Summary

We submit this rejoinder as a response to the Federal Government of Nigeria's *Response by the Presidency to the Statement Made by Bishop Kukah Before the United States Congress*¹, in which the Nigerian government misrepresents and vilifies the remarks Bishop of Sokoto Matthew Hassan Kukah made as a panelist during the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (TLHRC) virtual hearing "The State of Religious Freedom Around the Globe" on 13 July 2021.² This rejoinder pulls information from both Bishop Kukah's oral remarks at the TLHRC hearing and his written testimony that he submitted to the record, though it is unclear whether the Presidential spokesperson Shehu's response was to Bishop Kukah's written submission, oral statement, or both.

Summary of claims made by the Nigerian presidential spokesperson, Mr. Garba Shehu, on behalf of the Federal Government of Nigeria and Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari:

- 1) *Bishop Kukah is using his platform to sensationalize the issue of security in Nigeria and purposefully "castigate" the government.*
- 2) *Bishop Kukah is misrepresenting the situation in Nigeria by claiming that Christian students and schools are the only institutions affected by abductions and violence.*
- 3) *Bishop Kukah's statement contributed less to raising the situation of insecurity in Nigeria and more to exacerbating ethnic and religious tensions.*
- 4) *Bishop Kukah's remarks do not represent the views of Nigerian citizens.*

¹ Premium Times Nigeria, "[Presidency attacks Bishop Kukah over statement to U.S. Congress](#)", 18 July 2021.

² Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission [virtual hearing], "[The State of Religious Freedom Around the Globe](#)", 13 July 2021.

II. Formal Rejoinder

(1) *"It is unfortunate, and disappointing, for citizens of Nigeria to bear witness to one of their Churchmen castigating their country in front of representatives of a foreign parliament."*

(2) *"We are all too familiar with these overseas political tours that opposition politicians take – visiting foreign leaders and legislators in the United States, United Kingdom and Europe. So, the argument goes, if they are heard seriously abroad, then Nigerians back home should surely listen to them too."*

(3) *"But in order to be heard at all, and to maximize media coverage back home for their activities, inevitably these visits involve painting the worst possible picture of our country before their chosen foreign audience."*

Unfortunate and disappointing as it may be for Nigerian citizens to listen to stories and statistics that paint their home country in a negative light, what is most disheartening is that the atrocities taking place in Nigeria have become so harrowing and persistent that they have amassed global humanitarian concern.

In mid-July 2021, the International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law published a report highlighting that in just the first 200 days of 2021 (1 January to 18 July), there were 3,462 Nigerian Christian casualties resulting from Islamic jihadists.³ The number of Nigerian Christian deaths within these first seven months of 2021 has nearly approached the total 3,530 deaths in the entire year of between October 2019 and September 2020 reported by Open Doors.⁴ The Institute for Economics & Peace ranks Nigeria 3rd out of 135 nations in its 2020 Global Terrorism Index,⁵ [Nigeria falls in the 'very high' range for the impact of terrorism at 8.68 points out of 10] and ranks Nigeria 146th out of 163 nations in its 2021 Global Peace Index,⁶ [Nigeria falls in the 'very low' range for the state of peace at 2.7 points out of 10].

In addition, the United States Department of State's 2021 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report ranked Nigeria a Tier 2 nation for "not fully meet[ing] the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking." The report highlights Boko Haram's recruitment of child soldiers and abduction of women and girls for forced marriage and sexual slavery; officials of the Ministry of Defense and the Civilian Joint Task Force being complicit in sexual exploitation of internally displaced persons (IDPs); and corruption among law enforcement, security outfits, and judicial authorities that led to "undermined accountability for trafficking offenses."⁷

Research consultancy organization SBM Intelligence in its 2021 Half-Year Kidnap Report on Nigeria records 2,371 Nigerian civilians kidnapped across a total of 281 unique incidents, with the

³ International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law, *An International Report: 3,462 Christians Hacked To Death By Nigerian Jihadists In 200 Days. 3000 Abducted, 300 Churches And Ten Priests Attacked*, 18 July 2021.

⁴ Open Doors World Watch Research, *Nigeria: Full Country Dossier*, March 2021.

⁵ Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2020*, November 2020.

⁶ Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Peace Index 2021*, 4 June 2021.

⁷ United States Department of State, *2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Nigeria*, 1 July 2021.

ransom demands totaling ₦10 billion (≈ USD \$24 million).⁸ Since December 2020, there have been over 10 mass abductions from educational institutions, totaling no fewer than 1,000 Nigerian schoolchildren.⁹

Human Rights Measurement Initiative scored Nigeria 54.6% for the right to food; 48.2% for the right to health; 31.7% for the right to housing; and 32% for the right to work.¹⁰

Also regrettable is that a Nigerian bishop needs to use an American platform to raise the issues happening in his home country because the Nigerian government has been ineffectual in resolving the multiple security and humanitarian issues in the nation. Over two years ago in June 2019, Rebecca Sharibu – mother of teenage Nigerian Christian girl Leah Sharibu who was abducted by Boko Haram in February 2018 and who remains in captivity to this day – visited the United States to speak at an event hosted by The Heritage Foundation.¹¹ In her remarks, Rebecca Sharibu appealed to the United States as a last resort to achieving the safe return of her daughter. Her translator, Dr. Gloria Puldu, President of LEAH Foundation, explains:

“We stand here with Rebecca Sharibu, the mother of Leah Sharibu. She was abducted on the 19th of February [2018], 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 [Islamic proclamation of faith] [...] 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 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.”

Unlike what presidential spokesperson Garba Shehu claims, Bishop Kukah’s audience is not the ordinary Nigerian citizen – civilians back home are already painfully aware of the worsening security situation. Bishop Kukah is in a similar situation to that of Rebecca Sharibu and Dr. Gloria

⁸ SBM Intelligence, *Chart of the week: Nigeria 2021 half-year kidnap report*, 12 July 2021.

⁹ MaryAnne Iwara, “How Mass Kidnappings of Students Hinder Nigeria’s Future”, *United States Institute of Peace*, 8 July 2021.

¹⁰ Human Rights Measurement Initiative, *Executive Summary for Nigeria*, 24 June 2021.

¹¹ The Heritage Foundation [video], *Insecurity in Nigeria: Eyewitnesses Speak*, 11 June 2019.

Puldu; speaking on an American stage is a last resort, a final ditch effort to gain the attention of the international humanitarian community [politicians, civil society and journalists] in hopes that it will pressure the Nigerian government to take concrete actions. **Furthermore, the comparison between Bishop Kukah to political opposition leaders is incorrect and does not consider that, while many politicians are distant from the struggles of the civilians they represent, religious and local leaders, as Kukah explains, “feel the pulse of our people” and therefore in their remarks better represent the will of their communities.**

Bishop Kukah’s remarks did not seek to defame the Nigerian government, but rather, to point out its being ineffectual and unable to solve the plethora of domestic issues. With hope for his country’s future, Bishop Kukah emphasized that “Highly resourced, but endemically corrupt, a combination of serious governance missteps, series of military coups, years of maladministration, a culture of violence have seriously slowed down what should have been one of the greatest nations on earth.” Bishop Kukah could not be more correct. In 2020, Transparency International ranked Nigeria 146th out of 180 countries on its Corruption Perceptions Index and scored it 25/100, meaning that Nigerian citizens perceive the government to be very corrupt.¹² While the Nigerian government has undoubtedly taken steps to reduce corruption among state actors and institutions – steps including establishing the Open Treasury Initiative, Beneficial Ownership Disclosure Register¹³, Treasury Single Account, and Biometric Verification Number¹⁴ – there still exists corruption worthy of consideration in terms of national insecurity¹⁵.

During the presidential electoral race in 2019, President Buhari, up for re-election, “shared the stage with” a governor who had reportedly been videotaped receiving large sums of US currency; Senator Orji Uzor Kalu of the ruling presidential party was sentenced to 12 years’ prison time for graft.¹⁶ Ironically, in July 2020, Ibrahim Magu, head of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, was suspended on corruption and embezzlement charges.¹⁷ And Nigeria’s National Bureau of Statistics’ December 2019 *Survey on Corruption as Experienced by the Population* [which surveyed 33,000 households] revealed that the actors most reported to take bribes were police officers (33%), land registry officers (26%), tax/revenue officers (25%), prosecutors (23%), federal road safety corps (21%), judges/magistrates (20%), and others.¹⁸

Though Bishop Kukah does not elucidate what ‘governance missteps’ and poor administration he is referring to, what easily comes to mind include import substitution and prohibition policies¹⁹; over-dependence on the oil and allowance of fuel subsidies²⁰; designating the sectors of banking, food packaging, rural transportation, agricultural labor as ‘nonessential’ during the COVID-19

¹² Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2020*, 2021. ; John Campbell, “Perceptions of “Corruption in Nigeria Remain High, According to NGO”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 29 January 2020.

¹³ The African Courier, “Nigeria Has Lost \$400 Billion to Corruption and Multinational Companies – Justice Minister”, 18 December 2019.

¹⁴ Neil Munshi, “Nigeria makes anti-corruption moves amid criticism over progress”, *Financial Times*, 29 January 2020.

¹⁵ BTI Transformation Index, *Nigeria Country Report 2020*, 2020.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Oludayo Tade, “Why Buhari’s government is losing the anti-corruption war”, *The Conversation*, 7 March 2021.

¹⁸ National Bureau of Statistics, *Corruption in Nigeria: Patterns and Trends – Second Survey on Corruption as Experienced by the Population*, December 2019.

¹⁹ Alonso Soto, “Once Africa’s promise, Nigeria is heaving under crime, few jobs”, *Al Jazeera*, 15 June 2021. ; Gro Intelligence, “Nigeria’s Import Substitution Policies: Mixed Results”, 8 July 2016.

²⁰ Tope Alake, “Nigeria Wastes Oil Rally as Policy Muddle Deters Investors”, *Bloomberg*, 9 March 2021.

pandemic²¹; arbitrary devaluation of the Nigerian naira (₦)²²; the relatively unsuccessful Economic Sustainability Plan and failure to improve the weak social security system²³; and more.

Nigeria's 'culture of violence', to which Bishop Kukah refers, can be exemplified in the patterns by which "security forces, militias, vigilantes, religious fundamentalists and criminal gangs regularly violate civil liberties" and "torture, ill-treatment in police custody, extra-judicial killings and illegal military detention camps are still part and parcel of law enforcement operations".²⁴ Horrifying police brutality by Nigeria's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) – members of which were filmed in October 2020 dragging two civilians out of a hotel and shooting one – sparked nationwide protests and a global #EndSARS movement; also in October, Nigerian armed forces violently suppressed a peaceful protest at Lekki toll gate and killed 12 civilians.²⁵ An August 2021 report by Amnesty International found that at least 115 Nigerian citizens have been killed by national security forces within just four months in the Southeast; similarly, Amnesty recorded 52 instances of unlawful killings and 62 incidents of arbitrary arrest, ill-treatment, and torture.²⁶ Other abuses by Nigerian security outfits include extortion, clandestine detention, arson of private homes, and extrajudicial executions.

Bishop Kukah's words do not paint the worst possible picture of, nor do they misrepresent, Nigeria; rather, the violence, corruption, trafficking, abductions, and poverty taking place in Nigeria are tainting the nation's image. Indeed, Bishop Kukah raises this plethora of issues in his remarks at the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing. However, he also had many positive and hopeful notes on his country, such as that "home to almost two hundred million people communicating in over five hundred tongues, Nigeria remains one of the most enigmatic pieces of God's real estate on earth." Later, in his 14 July 2021 statement at the International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington, D.C., Bishop Kukah explained:

"We have great difficulty finding reasons to celebrate; and yet, with all of the stories you hear about Nigeria, it still remains one heck of a country. I've just been out of Nigeria for two days now and I'm anxious to go back. If you listen to the stories you would think that the country is about to go under. And of course, I share the pessimism of those who talk about Nigeria as a collapsing, decomposing, failed state. [...] But for me, one, as a Christian, I believe in resurrection. I believe in, more importantly – the young man that was referred to, Michael, was a seminarian of my diocese, the diocese of Sokoto – and since his brutal killing, quite a few things happened to make me feel very very strongly that even amidst all this confusion, God still has a purpose. [...] The other day I was at the airport [...] and then two gentlemen came into the lounge. They recognized me and greeted me very warmly, and the other person had not met me before [...] I remember him saying to his friend, 'you should know Bishop Kukah, he is the Catholic Bishop of the Catholic diocese of Sokoto.' [...] As I was straightening out my hand to greet him [...] this huge Muslim guy [...] came and he literally separated the handshake. [...] And he says to this man, literally scolding him, 'stop calling him the *Catholic* bishop of Sokoto. He is not the *Catholic* bishop

²¹ Lenis Saweda O. Liverpool-Tasie, Thomas Reardon, & Ben Belton, "Essential non-essentials': COVID-19 policy missteps in Nigeria rooted in persistent myths about African food supply chains", *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy*, 28 December 2020.

²² David Whitehouse, "Nigeria's devaluation won't fix managed-float woes", *The Africa Report*, 7 June 2021.

²³ Human Rights Watch, "Between Hunger and the Virus": *The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on People Living in Poverty in Lagos, Nigeria*, 28 July 2021.

²⁴ BTI Transformation Index, *Nigeria Country Report 2020*, 2020, *supra* note [15].

²⁵ Amnesty International, "#EndSARS Movement: From Twitter to Nigerian Streets", February 2021. ; Obasesam Okoi & MaryAnne Iwara, "The Failure of Governance in Nigeria: An Epistocratic Challenge", 12 April 2021.

²⁶ Amnesty International, "Nigeria: At least 115 people killed by security forces in four months in country's Southeast", 5 August 2021.

of Sokoto, he is *our bishop* in Sokoto. So stop calling him the *Catholic* bishop of Sokoto because you [are] excluding us Muslims. He is *our bishop*.' [...] Everyday, you see the possibilities of Nigeria's greatness in the lives of ordinary people, and they never get to the text. And all you need to do – despite all these burials and despite all the crises – is to go to the Nigerian market and see the way people live."²⁷

(4) Soon enough we inescapably hear an identical list of racist tropes against northerners, how one religion dominates governance above all others, how the government is doing nothing to address herder-farmer disturbances, and how the government spends money on infrastructure to benefit everyone but

the group and religion of the speaker. Of course, in order not to disappoint their western audience, regardless of fact, the list is always the same – and always slanted for whoever wishes to cross-check.

Bishop Kukah did not list any racist tropes against northern Nigerians in his remarks. He did make the point that “today the northwest and the north central and literally the length and breadth of Nigeria has now been invaded by bandits and herdsmen and killers and all kinds of people who have come from God knows where”. With regards to his mentioning of ‘herdsmen’, Bishop Kukah is describing the situation in radical Fulani militant herdsmen have engaged in violent attacks against Nigerian civilians across the Middle Belt and northern Nigeria. The controversy surrounding the term ‘Fulani herdsmen’ without the qualifiers ‘radical’ or ‘militant’ is that it appears to generalize the entire predominantly Muslim Fulani ethnic group as militants, despite that the portion of Fulani individuals engaged in militant extremism is a small minority of the entire ethnic group and, by that same logic, the majority of Fulani people are peaceful and reject the violence of their radical counterparts.²⁸ Bishop Kukah in his remarks, though he does not specify that those engaging in violence are specifically radical and militant, does clarify that “what is happening in Nigeria does not represent Islam, does not represent the Muslim community, as I already said. What is happening is a strain within Islam, that is, the Salafist brand of Islam that believes that the only practitioners of Islam are those who believe what they believe and how they believe. Let me also say that there are members of the Muslim community who have equally been targeted by the same attacks that the country has faced.” He also explains that “more northerners are dying, more Muslims are dying, more northerners are impoverished, more Muslims are unable to access education.” Furthermore, in July 2019, Bishop Kukah warned against stereotyping, “blanket demonization”, and “ethno-religious profiling” of Fulani herdsmen as a group.²⁹ In August 2019, it was reported that at the burial of Air Peace airline chairman’s father, Chief Michael Onyema, Bishop Kukah stressed that the issues of banditry and killings in Nigeria must be solved “holistically, instead of taking the easy path of blaming every crime on herdsmen”.³⁰

²⁷ IRF Summit 2021 [video], *IRF Summit ADF International Dinner: Bishop Kukah*, 27 July 2021.

²⁸ European Asylum Support Office, *Nigeria Security Situation*, June 2021, footnote 66. ; Modibo Ghaly Cissé, “[Understanding Fulani Perspectives on the Sahel Crisis](#)”, *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 22 April 2020.

²⁹ Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, “[Kukah warns against ‘anti-Fulani’ campaign](#)”, *Premium Times Nigeria*, 16 July 2019. ; Jude Egbas, “[Bishop Kukah: ‘Hating Fulani herdsmen is dangerous for Nigeria’](#)”, *Pulse Nigeria*, 17 July 2019.

³⁰ Adejayan Gbenga Gsong, “[Blaming Insecurity On Fulani, Herdsmen Won’t Help Nigeria – Bishop Kukah](#)”, *Within Nigeria*, 4 August 2019.

Bishop Kukah makes remarks that demonstrate how one religion dominates governance; however, his points were truthful. The points Bishop Kukah made – that Nigeria’s Christian Chief Justice was abruptly replaced by a Muslim, that the Senate President and Speaker of the House are Muslims, that the Majority leader is a Muslim – are all correct. Chief Justice Ibrahim Tanko Muhammad in 1980 received a degree in Islamic law and as recently as December 2019 advocated for more inclusion of Shari’a law in the constitution³¹; in response, the Christian Association of Nigeria explained that “no one can begrudge the CJN [Chief Justice Nigeria] for peacefully practicing his faith. But to seek to transform it into having greater space in our constitution for only one religion [...] looks like the path to making Islam a state religion.”³² Senate President Ahmed Ibrahim Lawan is a Muslim³³, and Speaker of the House Femi Gbajabiamila – who has been relatively quiet about his faith but has been seen in photographs participating in the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca – is suspected to be a Muslim convert from Christianity.³⁴

In addition to slanted religious makeup of government personnel, Islamic influence is also prevalent in the nation’s legislative and judicial systems. Nigeria’s Criminal Code Act in Article 204 includes laws criminalizing blasphemy³⁵ which states that “any person who does an act which any class of persons considers a public insult on their religion, with the intention that they should consider such an insult, and any person who does an unlawful act with the knowledge that any class of persons will consider it such an insult, is guilty of a misdemeanor and is liable to imprisonment for two years”.³⁶ At the same time, the Nigerian constitution in sections 275 and 279 devolves power to the states to create their own Shari’a courts – which operate alongside secular courts – and draft Shari’a penal provisions, and since 1999, a total of 12 northern Nigerian states have implemented such criminal codes and court systems to which the states’ Muslims are subject to.³⁷ Sharia courts in states such as Zamfara, Kano, Sokoto, Katsina, Bauchi, Borno, Jigawa, Kebbi, Yobe, Kaduna, Niger, Gombe have been established and, although they are encouraged to only oversee cases of family law, have taken up and imposed punishments for criminal cases. These severe Sharia punishments often include death sentences, limb amputation, lashes, banishment, stoning, and more for *hudud* crimes – ‘crimes against God’ – including theft, illicit sexual relations, consuming alcohol, and apostasy.

In late January 2021, a 16-year-old teenage boy, Omar Farouq, was charged with blasphemy and sentenced to 10 years in prison by a Sharia court in Kano State after he had insulted Allah during an argument with a close friend; fortunately, Farouq’s conviction was quickly reversed, not because laws criminalizing blasphemy inherently violate human rights or because the accused was a minor, but because he did not have legal representation at trial.³⁸ In August 2020, 22-year-old Islamic gospel singer Yahaya Sharif-Aminu was charged with blasphemy and sentenced to death by hanging by a Kano State Sharia court for circulating a song on WhatsApp that allegedly contained derogatory lyrics about the Prophet.³⁹ In late January 2021, an Appeal Panel ordered a

³¹ Alfred Olufemi, “Nigeria’s chief justice wants more Shari’a in constitution”, *Premium Times Nigeria*, 13 December 2019.

³² Luminous Jannamike, “Sharia: CJN’s call for Constitution amendment threat to national unity – CAN”, *Vanguard*, 14 December 2019.

³³ Muslim News Nigeria, “What you need to know about Ahmed Lawan, the new President of the 9th Senate”, 11 June 2019.

³⁴ Daily Advent Nigeria, “Speakership: How Femi Gbajabiamila is Winning Northern Politicians’ Hearts as ‘Islamic Cleric’”, 2 June 2019.

³⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), *Violating Rights: Enforcing the World’s Blasphemy Laws*, 9 December 2020.

³⁶ *Nigeria: Criminal Code Act* [Nigeria], Cap C38 LFN 2004, 1 June 1916

³⁷ USCIRF, *Shari’ah Criminal Law in Northern Nigeria*, December 2019.

³⁸ Stephanie Busari, “Outrage as Nigeria sentences teenage boy to 10 years in prison for blasphemy”, *CNN*, 30 January 2021. ; Stephanie Busari, “‘They were unjust to me,’ says teenager freed after blasphemy sentence quashed in Nigeria”, *CNN*, 31 January 2021.

³⁹ BBC News, “Nigerian singer sentenced to death for blasphemy in Kano state”, 10 August 2020.

retrial for Sharif-Aminu because he had no legal representation during his original trial.⁴⁰ In April 2020, humanist and human rights defender Mubarak Bala was arrested for blasphemy after he allegedly made Facebook posts insulting the Prophet; Bala has been detained by Kano State authorities for over a year despite that in December 2020 the Federal High Court in Abuja called for his release and ruled that his detention “constituted gross infringements of his rights to personal liberty, fair hearing, freedom of thought, expression and movement.”⁴¹ Bala’s lawyer filed a petition for Bala’s bail and a hearing was supposed to take place on 20 April 2021, though it has yet to take place as courts have been on strike. In August 2021, the court charged Mubarak Bala under customary law, 15 months after his arrest, for causing “public disturbance” by posting “blasphemous” content, USCIRF Commissioner Fred Davie has called for the dropping of all charges and for his immediate release.⁴²

Bishop Kukah does not make the claim that the Nigerian government has made no efforts to combat violence between farmers and herders in Nigeria. Rather, he highlights that the government is both “helpless” and “ineffective” in resolving the magnitude of domestic issues, and in some cases has even appeared “uninterested” in doing so. Moreover, Bishop Kukah’s statement does not focus solely on the farmer-herder situation but further touches upon other issues such as religious extremist terrorist activities; abductions and sex slavery; official corruption; COVID-19; and more in efforts to center his discussion on insecurity. True to Bishop Kukah’s words, the Nigerian federal government and other state actors have exhibited – and even admitted – its incapacity to tackle various forms of insecurity. On 16 March 2021, the Minister of State for Education, Chukwuemeka Nwajiuba, in light of recent school abductions by armed assailants, explained the following:

“The Federal Government cannot secure every house. Everybody needs to be vigilant. We have passed this message to all our schools so that anywhere they are, if there is any threat, they know the nearest security agency to contact. Almost all the schools in Nigeria, whether private or owned by the Federal Government, are mostly all fenced, except some state schools. As you may also be aware, even if you put up a fence, these people (bandits) have been known to come through gates. So, perimeter fencing, by themselves, is not too effective. The security consciousness is the thing. If you hear where some of them are being held, you will know that it is a question of self-consciousness and communities informing officials on time.”⁴³

However, even in situations where the Nigerian government is warned of an imminent attack on a school, or is aware of the heightened possibilities of attack, it has been either unable or unwilling to act decisively to protect students. Prior to the 2018 Boko Haram abduction of 110 schoolgirls in Dapchi, the Nigerian authorities offered no bolstering of security for the Government Girls Science and Technical College despite receiving numerous calls up to four hours preceding the

⁴⁰ Amnesty International, “Nigeria: Further Information: Retrial Ordered For Singer On Death Row: Yahaya Sharif-Aminu”, 29 January 2021.

⁴¹ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “One year after: Authorities must comply with Federal High Court decision to release Mubarak Bala on bail”, 28 April 2021.

⁴² @USCIRF (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom), “Cmmr @FredDavieUSCIRF: ‘Authorities finally charged humanist #MubarakBala under customary law w/causing a public disturbance by posting “blasphemous” content 15 months after his arrest. We call for all his charges to be dropped & his immediate release.’ 5 August 2021 <https://twitter.com/USCIRF/status/1423310688437538823?s=20>.”

⁴³ Sahara Reporters, “We Can’t Secure All Schools, Be Vigilant, Education Minister, Nwajiuba, Tells Parents”, 16 March 2021.

incident warning that an armed convoy of militants were headed towards the town.⁴⁴ President Buhari has discouraged regional governors and officials from paying ransom for the release of kidnapped schoolchildren, and Governor Nasir El-Rufai of Kaduna State – where 39 students were abducted from the Federal College of Forestry Mechanization in March 2021⁴⁵ – has publicly stated that he would not pay ransom for the release of hostages.⁴⁶ The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack in response to the 2018 Dapchi kidnapping conducted a survey of Nigerian students regarding security in schools. One girl reported that when she and other students called a local security outlet to alert them that Boko Haram was attacking the College of Agriculture in Gujba, Yobe State, the soldier responded that they could not act unless they received an order from his commander; in fact, by the time security forces arrived, Boko Haram had already waged its attack and had retreated.⁴⁷ Once, when the Borno State government paid to have a trench dug to surround the University of Maiduguri to prevent insurgents from approaching the school, the federal government had not agreed to finalize the payment. Throughout various Nigerian states, communities have had to temporarily or permanently close tens of schools on the grounds that, without government assistance, they were “not sufficiently safe” for students and could not guarantee security.

Students are not the only ones who feel the effects of government inaction and insufficient action; ordinary civilians have also felt ignored by authorities in times of distress. Years earlier, in 2017, Benue Governor Samuel Ortom sent multiple letters to the president expressing the urgent need for assistance amidst repetitive militant attacks on farming communities throughout his state; Governor Ortom reported receiving no response from Buhari, and a police inspector claimed that the letters had never even reached the president's desk.⁴⁸ A late 2020 survey conducted by Amnesty International of 1,126 residents of Kaduna, Katsina, Niger, Plateau, Sokoto, Taraba, and Zamfara revealed that in the few instances in which soldiers and security agents responded on time to militant attacks, they quickly retreated upon seeing the assailants with advanced equipment and ammunition.⁴⁹ Impunity also exacerbates the situation greatly; militants see how Boko Haram and other insurgents have not been brought to justice for their violent atrocities and are emboldened to follow suit in the knowledge that they will likely not face prosecution.⁵⁰ As recently as June 2021, President Buhari himself in a television address admitted that despite his promises to defeat insecurity when he came to power in 2015, he has failed to do so and that he expresses his “heartfelt condolences” to the families of victims lost to “senseless kidnappings and murders” across north-west and central Nigeria. Buhari concluded his remarks by once again reaffirming that he would “do everything in [his] power to ensure security”, though it is unsure whether the reality will change in the future.⁵¹

Bishop Kukah does not make any complaints that the government spends money on infrastructure that does not benefit people of his own religion. Conversely, he encourages the government and even the international community to invest in services that will benefit Nigerian

⁴⁴ Amnesty International, “[Nigeria: Security forces failed to act on warnings about Boko Haram attack hours before abduction of schoolgirls](#)”, 20 March 2018.

⁴⁵ Al Jazeera, “[Kidnappers free 29 students abducted in Nigeria's Kaduna state](#)”, 5 May 2021.

⁴⁶ Joe Parkinson, “[Why Nigerian Schoolchildren Keep Getting Kidnapped: A Brutal Business Model That Pays](#)”, *Wall Street Journal*, 23 March 2021.

⁴⁷ Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), “[I will Never Go Back to School! The Impact of Attacks on Education for Nigerian Women and Girls](#)”, October 2018.

⁴⁸ International Crisis Group, *Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence*, 26 July 2018.

⁴⁹ Amnesty International, “[Nigeria: Government failings leave rural communities at the mercy of gunmen](#)”, 24 August 2020.

⁵⁰ Amnesty International, *Harvest of Death: Three Years of Bloody Clashes Between Farmers and Herders in Nigeria*, 2018.

⁵¹ BBC News, “[Boko Haram: Nigerian president admits failure to end violence](#)”, 12 June 2021.

civilians regardless of their faith, class, gender, etc. For example, Bishop Kukah stresses that investment in education – through scholarships, rebuilding of schools, etc. – both Christian and Muslim students will be benefitted. More specifically, Bishop Kukah highlights that investment in education and security can help the “15-16 million young people [who] are on the streets, 80% or 90% of [which] are Muslim children.” Moreover, Bishop Kukah encourages international funding for the construction of health facilities, a project which will benefit all civilians who need treatment regardless of their background; in fact, the Hungarian government has supported the establishment such a health clinic and diagnostic center in Sokoto. Other similar projects in Sokoto have seen the construction of laboratories to process COVID-19 tests, the foundation of the Sokoto State Contributory Health Care Management Scheme, the establishment of the Sokoto State Emergency Response Team, Central Ambulance Service, the Healthcare Financing and Medical Tourism Development Unit, and more.⁵² Furthermore, Bishop Kukah highlights that “amidst the pandemic, the Catholic Bishops offered the federal government a total of 456 health facilities across the country in case the Covid-19 pandemic proved overwhelming and overstretches the lean resources of both federal and state governments.” In May 2020, it was confirmed by the State Ministry of Health that Bishop Kukah donated a 30-room hotel and a 15-room hospital for COVID-19 management to the Sokoto State Government.⁵³ **Bishop Kukah’s recommendations on investment and assistance, and even his contributions to the COVID-19 response measures, are made with his concern for the nation’s entire civilian population and without discrimination on the basis of religion.**

Presidential spokesperson Garba Shehu’s claims that the list of Nigerian domestic problems that Bishop Kukah and other opposition politicians speak of is “always the same” is not because they wish to sensationalize the issues, but because the issues are unchanging and have even exacerbated in recent years. Bishop Kukah was correct in pointing out that “things have just unraveled in the last five or six years since the coming to power of General Buhari”. While it is true that Nigeria under Buhari and with the help of forces from Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Benin had pushed Boko Haram out of multiple northern regions in Nigeria and even managed to shrink its area of influence in 2015, Boko Haram has made a near-full resurgence in the six years since Buhari claimed they had “technically defeated” the militant group.⁵⁴ The International Committee on Nigeria (ICON) reported that between 2000 and 2014, Boko Haram was the primary actor in 2,989 violent incidents in Nigeria causing 20,436 casualties. By contrast, the number of violent incidents involving Boko Haram raised to 2,665 and casualties reached 22,806 during the period between 2015 to June 2020.⁵⁵ Within the past five years as well, militant groups – sometimes Boko Haram specifically and other times related groups – have perpetrated tens of mass abductions on schools in various states throughout Nigeria; in just the first eight months of 2021, 27 students were kidnapped from the Government Science Secondary School in Niger State (17 February)⁵⁶, 276 from the Government Girls Secondary School in Zamfara State (26 February)⁵⁷, 39 from the Federal College of Forestry Mechanization in Kaduna State (11 March)⁵⁸, approximately 20 from

⁵² Anselm Okolo, “Tambuwal’s giant strides in healthcare in Sokoto”, *The Sun*, 17 August 2020.

⁵³ Kayode Oyer, “Bishop Kukah Donates 30 Room Hotel As Isolation Centre in Sokoto”, *Punch Nigeria*, 4 May 2020.

⁵⁴ BBC News, “Nigeria Boko Haram: Militants ‘technically defeated’ – Buhari”, 24 December 2015.

⁵⁵ 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.

⁵⁶ Al Jazeera, “Kidnappers release 42 abducted from school in Nigeria”, 27 February 2021.

⁵⁷ BBC News, “Nigeria’s Zamfara school abduction: More than 300 Nigerian girls missing”, 26 February 2021.

⁵⁸ Vanguard News, “Relief, as kidnappers release 29 Afaka students”, 6 May 2021.

Greenfield University in Kaduna State (20 April)⁵⁹, 3 from the Federal University of Agriculture in Benue State (24 April)⁶⁰, and 100 from Bethel Baptist High School in Kaduna State (July 6).⁶¹

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the closure of businesses and the stringent lockdown measures, poverty has expanded and will continue to do so until an additional 11 million Nigerians are expected to fall into poverty by 2022⁶²; concurrently, Nigerian civilians are becoming increasingly worried about mugging, robbery, burglary, and theft.⁶³

The challenges that Nigeria continues to face force us to question the claim made by President Buhari in late January 2021 that “you know the stage we were in 2015, you know the stage we are now, and the undertakings we made. We promised to secure the country, revive the economy, and fight corruption. None has been easy, but we have certainly made progress.”⁶⁴ **The reason that Bishop Kukah and others continue to raise issues such as trafficking, abduction, violent militant attacks, and more is because they still persist despite all of the Nigerian government's various actions and due in part to its various inactions.**

(5) There is no bias in this government when the president is northern and Muslim, the vice president is southern and Christian, and the cabinet is equally balanced between the two religions. But neither is there anything in our Constitution to state that political posts must be apportioned according to ethnicity or faith. It takes a warped frame of mind for a critic to believe ethnicity is of primary importance in public appointments. It is yet more troubling to hear a Churchman isolating one group for criticism purely on ethnic lines.

While the question regarding the extent of bias in the Nigerian government due to religion is more difficult to answer, researchers and civilians have pointed out that the nation's governance has been exhibiting preference towards Islam in recent years. Nigeria has in some instances been regarded as a constitutionally-provisioned secular state; though the 1999 Constitution itself does not reference the phrase ‘secular’, Section 10 states that “the Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion”.⁶⁵ However, numerous scholars have highlighted that in reality, Nigeria meets the criteria of a ‘multi-religious state’, as seen in the observance of Christian and Islamic holidays, oath-taking on the Bible or the Quran, and the adoption of Islam as the state religion and imposition of Sharia law by some Nigerian northern states. Others have pointed out that Islam has been perceived as gaining traction in broader Nigerian politics via the aforementioned Sharia jurisprudence in some states⁶⁶; Nigeria's membership in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)⁶⁷; the existence of the Islam in Africa Organization (IAO) which is allegedly funded by some Nigerian government outlets⁶⁸; the 2021

⁵⁹ Al Jazeera, “Kidnappers free 14 Nigerian students abducted in Kaduna state”, 29 May 2021.

⁶⁰ Alfred Olufemi, “Gunmen kidnap three university students in Benue”, *Premium Times Nigeria*, 26 April 2021.

⁶¹ Morning Star News & Christianity Today, “140 Nigerian Baptist Students Kidnapped in Kaduna”, 5 July 2021.

⁶² Alonso Soto, “Nigeria's cratering economy threatens to spread poverty and violence”, *The Japan Times*, 17 June 2021.

⁶³ Simona Varrella, *Crime in Nigeria – statistics & facts* [data set], *Statista*, 24 February 2021. ; Simona Varrella, *Levels of worry related to different crimes in Nigeria 2021* [data set], *Statista*, 19 February 2021.

⁶⁴ Nasir Ayitogo, “Insecurity: Nigeria in ‘state of emergency’, Buhari tells new service chiefs”, *Premium Times Nigeria*, 27 January 2021.

⁶⁵ *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* [Nigeria], Act No. 24, 5 May 1999.

⁶⁶ Ekwutosi E. Offiong & Charles E. Ekpo, “Nigeria: The Paradox of a Secular State”, *Politics and Religion*, 2020.

⁶⁷ Christian O. Ele, “Islamization of Nigeria: Implications for Sustainable Peace”, *International Journal of Social Sciences and English Literature*, 2018.

⁶⁸ Momoh Lawani Yesufu, “The Impact of Religion on a Secular State: The Nigerian Experience”, *National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies*, 2016.

appointment of 20 Appeal Court judges, 13 of which were from the North and exclusively Muslim⁶⁹; the persistence and expansion of Islamist terrorist activity by groups such as Boko Haram for over eleven years since 2009, despite presidential promises of eradication.⁷⁰ One scholar, Christian O. Ele, noted that “The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria mentioned Sharia 73 times, Grand Khandi 54 times, Islam 28 times, Muslims 10 times and there is no single mention of Christ, Christianity or Church...These gaps in the Constitution were calculated...to give the mischievous impression that Nigeria is an Islamic Country.”⁷¹ Another individual who grew up as a boy in southern Nigeria reflected on watching as the “ruling class in the north of Nigeria had to be seriously subsumed into the mould of the Islamic faith as a way of protecting her Islamic and political interests.”⁷² In light of these observances over the past decades and in recent years, the perspective has been raised that “the only antidote to recurring religious uprisings and ceaseless agitations and counter-agitations of different religious bodies in a multi-religious state like Nigeria is the adoption of true secularism”.⁷³

According to the national constitution, Nigeria was established to be a representative democratic republic; therefore, it should be expected government authorities would be elected to represent the ideas and backgrounds of their constituents. In Nigeria, the population is roughly divided down the middle with half identifying as Muslim and the other half identifying as Christian. Although, sources vary; some estimate 54% are Muslim and 35% are Christian [CIA World Factbook]⁷⁴, and others say the gap is much narrower, with 51.1% Muslim and 46.9% Christian [Pew Research].⁷⁵

Nigeria’s government, as a representative republic, should ideally reflect the population of the nation, as varied as it is in terms of political opinion, faith, ethnicity, and more.

Such is solidified by the adoption and implementation of the federal character principle which has been a major component since the 1979 Constitution and which explicitly requires that government and public office appointments equitably and “fairly reflect the linguistic, ethnic, religious, and geographic diversity of the country”, such as via affirmative action or quotas.⁷⁶ Chapter II of the most recent 1999 Constitution continues to institutionalize the federal character principle; however, section 6 (6) (c) of the same document renders the entirety of Chapter II “non-justiciable”.⁷⁷ At the same time, while the Constitution in Section 153 established the Federal Character Commission (FCC) which is tasked with enforcing the principle, and while the Nigerian president is obligated to abide by the principle in his appointments, both the FCC and the president have fallen short of their duties. By 2019, only a handful of President Buhari’s 40-some-odd appointments made during his presidential terms were from southern Nigeria, and he appears to have disregarded the constitutional provision itself:

⁶⁹ Ola Ajayi, “Skewed appointments polarizing Nigeria – CAN president”, *Vanguard*, 28 March 2021.

⁷⁰ Isidore U. Nwanaju, Ngozi U. Emeka-Nwobia, & T. Nwanaju Uzoma, “Religious Bias and Governance in Nigeria: A Flash Back”, *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 2017.

⁷¹ Christian O. Ele, “Islamization of Nigeria: Implications for Sustainable Peace”, *International Journal of Social Sciences and English Literature*, 2018.

⁷² Momoh Lawani Yesufu, “The Impact of Religion on a Secular State: The Nigerian Experience”, *supra note*.

⁷³ Kehinde Adegbite, “Is Nigeria a Secular State?”, *The New Jurist*, 28 May 2012.

⁷⁴ CIA World Factbook, *Nigeria*, last updated 28 July 2021.

⁷⁵ Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, *Nigeria: Religious Demography: Affiliation*, 2020.

⁷⁶ Ladipo Adamolekun, John Erero, & Basil Oshionebo, “‘Federal Character’ and Management of the Federal Civil Service and the Military”, *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 1991.

⁷⁷ C. E. Okeke, “Implementation and enforcement of the federal character principle in Nigeria”, *Nnamdi Azikiwe University Journal of International Law and Jurisprudence*, 2019.

“While defending his lopsided appointments, President Buhari boasted in an interview with BBC Hausa Service that he has constitutional right to appoint only those he could trust. According to him, the Constitution allowed him full control over the choice of his closest friends. Unfortunately, most of those appointees which he classified as his closest officials are among those that the Constitution specifically mandates the President to comply with the federal character principle in their appointments. For example, section 171 (5) of the Constitution provides that the President ‘shall have regard to the federal character principle and the need to promote national unity’ while appointing ‘any office on the personal staff of the President’ including the Secretary to the Government of the Federation. The attitude of the President Buhari-led federal government towards the federal character principle constitutes an outright defeat of the utilitarian function of the federal character principle – promotion of national unity and integration.”⁷⁸

In a 2020 appraisal of the FCC, researchers found that the FCC formula on regulating the equitable appointment of individuals to public service positions was focused exclusively on geopolitical zones rather than ethnicity, religion, or demography.⁷⁹ Another 2019 study concluded that “appointments made by various administrations since the inception of FCP [federal character principle] have rather reflected exclusion rather than equity”, and that “the commitment of political leadership and public officials in maintaining the status quo of dominance of the elite priority” has rendered the FCP unsuccessful in ensuring equity and inclusion among official positions in the military, federal ministries, the police force, state security services (SSS), immigration services, prison services, and more.⁸⁰

However, it is essential to note that, contrary to Presidential spokesperson Shehu’s claims, Bishop Kukah does not in his remarks make any mention of ethnicity among government officials. However, his remarks that the religious makeup of government positions have in recent years become more skewed in favor of Muslims – while in the past more attention was paid to balance of faith representation – are true.

(6) With due respect to the esteemed position he holds, the Bishop’s assertion that only Christian schools are being targeted by bandits or terrorists is not supported by the facts on the ground. It is sad to say but also true that victims of crime, kidnapping, banditry and terrorism cut across all strata of society. Sad but true that Kankara students in Katsina State were stolen by bandits of the same Islamic faith as those they took away. The same may be true of those who are still holding the 134 students of the Islamic School at Tegina in Niger State. The nation witnessed the sad incident of the female students abducted by bandits at Jangebe in Zamfara State and the over 100 predominantly Muslim students of the Federal Government Girls College Birnin Yauri in Kebbi State who are currently in captivity-and the nation’s security agencies are hard at work to release them unharmed.

(7) The attack on Christian students is sad and unacceptable; so also is the abduction of students of other faiths. The claim that only Christian schools are being targeted is totally untrue.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Leila Demarest, Arnim Langer, & Ukoha Ukiwo, “Nigeria’s Federal Character Commission (FCC): a critical appraisal”, *Oxford Development Studies*, February 2020.

⁸⁰ Adeline Idike, Ikechukwu Ogeze Ukeje, Harrison Onuwa Iwuala, Johnpaul Chukwujindu Onele, Raphael Abumchukwu Ekwunife, Kelechi Nwachukwu, & Ogbulu Udu, “The practice of inclusive representation in Nigeria bureaucracy: The federal character principle experience”, *Cogent Social Sciences*, July 2019.

Bishop Kukah does not make the claim that only Christian schools are targeted by banditry and kidnapping; instead, he highlights the importance of security in educational facilities that serve people of all faith. For example, Bishop Kukah explains that “A significant percentage of senior Muslims in Nigeria and non-Christians and non-Catholics are beneficiaries of Catholic education” and that “we require practical, measurable forms of assistance that can help us to change the lives of our children. Whether it is through scholarships, or whether it is through the rebuilding of schools, and so on and so forth.”⁸¹

Indeed, schools with Christian students and Muslims students alike have come under attack by mass abductions; however, it is only expected that Bishop Kukah, who in his address at the TLHRC hearing was speaking on behalf of the Catholic Church, would focus on the situations that have affected the community with which he engages most regularly and most closely: the Christian community. For example, Bishop Kukah raises the story of 18-year-old Michael Nnadi who, prior to his murder, was a seminarian within Bishop Kukah’s own diocese of Sokoto. Bishop Kukah himself was the one who in May 2020 released the public statement that “with a very heavy heart, I wish to inform you that our dear son, Michael was murdered by the bandits on a date we cannot confirm.”⁸² Bishop Kukah also attended Michael’s funeral and delivered an earnest sermon reflecting on his personal relationship with the deceased and his family:

“I have the rare honour of being considered the principal mourner in this ugly tragedy. It is not an honour that I am worthy of receiving. [...] The greater honour goes to his immediate family whose devotion as Catholics laid the foundation for his faith and vocation. To his grandmother, Mrs. Eunice Nwokocha, a most simple, beautiful and devout Catholic woman whose devotion and dedication saw Michael and his siblings, Chukwuebuka, Francis, Augustine and Raphael brought up in all the fine principles and disciplines of the Catholic faith. [...] I got to know Mama only after the sudden death of her daughter, Caroline, who had been a devoted Lector in our Cathedral. On the day we learnt that Michael and the other Seminarians were kidnapped, [...] breaking the news to her and the grandchildren proved to be one of the most emotionally challenging moments for me. [...] Finally breaking the news opened a different chapter in this ugly, painful but memorable tragedy. [...] There is hope, my dear friends. Are we angry? Yes, we are. Are we sad? Of course, we are. Are we tempted to vengeance? Indeed, we are. Do we feel betrayed? You bet. Do we know what to do? Definitely. Do we know when to do it? Why not? Do we know how? Absolutely. Are we in a war? Yes. But what would Christ have us do? The only way He has pointed out to us is the non-violent way. It is the road less travelled, but it is the only way.”⁸³

Bishop Kukah in his remarks also raised the story of Nigerian Christian girl Leah Sharibu, who at 14 years old was abducted alongside 109 other schoolgirls from the Government Girls’ Science and Technical College in Dapchi, Yobe state, in 2018. Now 18 years old, Leah is the only remaining student in Boko Haram captivity because she has refused to renounce Christianity and convert to Islam at her kidnappers’ requests.⁸⁴ Reports have also circulated that Leah was forcibly married off to a top Boko Haram commander and that she has given birth to two children.⁸⁵ The reason Bishop

⁸¹ Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission [virtual hearing], “[The State of Religious Freedom Around the Globe](#)”, 13 July 2021, [time stamp 1:29:00, 1:37:21].

⁸² Catholic News Agency, “[Murdered Nigerian seminarian was killed for announcing gospel, killer says](#)”, 2 May 2020.

⁸³ Independent Catholic News, “[Nigeria: Bishop Kukah at Funeral Mass of seminarian Michael Nnadi](#)”, 16 February 2020.

⁸⁴ BBC News, “[Kidnapped Dapchi schoolgirls freed in Nigeria](#)”, 22 March 2018.

⁸⁵ Guardian Nigeria, “[Leah Sharibu gives birth to second baby in Boko Haram captivity](#)”, 23 March 2021.

Kukah highlights Leah's story is because her continued captivity three years later is a direct result of her identity as a Christian, whereas those abducted girls from Dapchi who are Muslim were released within a month of the original incident. As Bishop Kukah explains, "the story of Leah Sharibu suggests very clearly that there is in many instances a correlation between the conditions in which people find themselves and the faith that they believe in." **Bishop Kukah does not make the claim that "only Christian schools" and students are targeted for abductions, but that their cases are made unique and sometimes more intractable due to the disparity between their faith and their kidnapers'.** In late 2014, Human Rights Watch conducted an interview with 30 Christian female students who had been kidnapped by Boko Haram between April 2013 and April 2014. Some reported that were threatened with hanging, whipping, or physical assault if they refused to renounce their faith, convert to Islam, stop attending school, or wear Islamic dress such as hijabs.⁸⁶ The United States Department of State in its 2021 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report states that "The groups [Boko Haram and ISIS-WA] continue to abduct women and girls in the northern region of Nigeria, some of whom they subject to domestic servitude, sexual slavery, and forced labor. Boko Haram routinely forces girls to choose between forced marriages to its fighters – for the purpose of sexual slavery – or becoming suicide bombers, with the terrorist organization frequently using drugs to control victims' behavior."⁸⁷

It is also appropriate that Bishop Kukah would focus on the kidnapping of Christian pupils during his remarks at the 13 July 2021 TLHRC hearing because just eight days prior, on 5 July 2021, unidentified assailants abducted 121 Christian children from Bethel Baptist High School in Kaduna state.⁸⁸ As of 25 July, 34 of the kidnapped children have either escaped or were released by their perpetrators, but 87 still remain in captivity.⁸⁹

Presidential spokesperson Shehu unreasonably criticizes Bishop Kukah for pointing out a problem – insecurity in educational facilities for children of all faith – which he himself then admits is true by listing the abduction of 134 students of the Islamic School at Tegna in Niger State and the more than 100 primarily Muslim students kidnapped from the Federal Government Girls College in Kebbi state. Highlighting these incidents does less to counteract Bishop Kukah's focus on Christian abductions and more to acknowledge how widespread and indiscriminate mass kidnappings of students are and, more importantly, the government's inability to protect children. In July 2021, the Kaduna State Schools Quality Assurance Authority ordered the closure of 13 schools, predominantly Christian, as a last resort to quash school abductions.⁹⁰

(8) As a nation and a people, we must together define evil as evil. We must not allow our religious differences to divide us. No one gains but the evil doers when we divide our ranks according to ethnicity and religion in confronting them.

(9) There is no place in mainstream civil discourse for those who actively, negatively, and publicly label an individual ethnic group, especially before a foreign audience. These are not the views expressed or opinions held by the vast majority of the citizens of Nigeria. For all our challenges as a nation, nearly all of us seek to live together in harmony, celebrating differences, and finding common ground as

⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch, *"Those Terrible Weeks in Their Camp": Boko Haram Violence against Women and Girls in Northeast Nigeria*, 27 October 2014.

⁸⁷ United States Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report*, June 2021.

⁸⁸ The Guardian, *"Attackers kidnap 140 pupils from Nigerian boarding school"*, 5 July 2021.

⁸⁹ Al Jazeera, *"Kidnappers release another 28 abducted children from Nigeria"*, 25 July 2021.

⁹⁰ CBN News, *"Christian Schools in Nigeria Forced to Close as Violent Attacks, Kidnappings Continue in Kaduna State"*, 13 July 2021.

Nigerians above all. But people like Kukah are doing their best to sow discord and strife among Nigerians.

Bishop Kukah in his remarks at the TLHRC hearing did not make any attempt to use religious differences as a means to divide the Nigerian populace or “sow strife”, contrary to what Presidential spokesperson Shehu claimed. In fact, Bishop Kukah made many statements in which he appealed for collaboration between faith communities:

“And of course the tragedy in all this is that it’s not as if Muslims are having a better deal because more Muslims have been killed as a result of the crisis that we are in than Christians. But again, unfortunately, this is not the way we should be looking at this whole thing and what the Bishops Conference has also tried to push for is the need for us to focus on our common humanity....”⁹¹

“The fate of the Christian minorities in northern Nigeria and of course even Muslim minorities elsewhere, these are the issues. But I’d like to focus on the fact that we require practical, measurable forms of assistance that can help us to change the lives of our children....”⁹²

“So at the level of ordinary people we are all working together and working as closely as we can because like we all keep saying, it’s not as if Muslims are having a better life because they’ve got all the social services and the rest of us don’t have them, it is that we are faced with the governments that are underperforming, governments that have adopted corruption, inefficiency and that the reaction we are facing is largely a result of a state that is unable to deliver on its welfare....”⁹³

“It is important to restate [that] even though the purveyors of terrorism, banditry, kidnapping and murders of our people continue to appeal to Islam as their source of inspiration, what we are dealing with is the Jihadist/Salafist supremacist strain of the faith that is at best a cancer that threatens the Muslim world itself. [...] So, the problem is not with Islam but with the Salafist views perpetrated by those who insist on using violence to perpetrate their evil deeds....”⁹⁴

“I was just making the point that we do not have an intrinsic conflict between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. As I said, I live in Sokoto which is like the Vatican of the Muslims. I have very good relationships with the sultan, I’ve got good relationships with the governor. We’ve got good relationships, but we have terribly bad and toxic politics which have turned Nigerians into victims....”⁹⁵

⁹¹ Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission [virtual hearing], [“The State of Religious Freedom Around the Globe”](#), 13 July 2021, [time stamp 1:34:33].

⁹² Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission [virtual hearing], [“The State of Religious Freedom Around the Globe”](#), 13 July 2021, [time stamp 1:37:12].

⁹³ Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission [virtual hearing], [“The State of Religious Freedom Around the Globe”](#), 13 July 2021, [time stamp 2:38:31].

⁹⁴ Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah, Catholic Diocese of Sokoto, Nigeria, [“Statement to the House of Foreign Affairs Committee on the Nigerian Situation”](#), 13 July 2021.

⁹⁵ Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission [virtual hearing], [“The State of Religious Freedom Around the Globe”](#), 13 July 2021, [time stamp 2:40:38].

We make the claim that Presidential spokesperson Shehu, by misrepresenting some of Bishop Kukah's remarks – such as by falsely claiming that he said only Christian schools are targets of terrorist activity; that he made racist or ethnically insensitive statements; that he sensationalized the issue – is at more fault than Bishop Kukah of using “religious differences to divide us.” Moreover, **Bishop Kukah is not culpable for ‘sowing strife’ among Nigerians; terrorists, bandits, militants, and criminals are responsible for sowing strife by committing horrendous acts against thousands of Nigerian civilians.**

Furthermore, Bishop Kukah did not in his statement “actively, negatively, and publicly label an individual ethnic group” as Presidential spokesperson Shehu claims. Shehu states that “these are not the views expressed or opinions held by the vast majority of the citizens of Nigeria.” Indeed, the majority of Nigerians and Bishop Kukah do not hold ethnically charged enmity towards their fellow Nigerian civilians. Bishop Kukah's statements at the TLHRC hearing, which were – contrary to Shehu's claims – dignified and uncontroversial – were both well-received reinforced by many. For example, comments responding to the official Facebook post of Presidential Shehu's response as well as news articles on the topic are as follows, edited for clarity:

“You just justified that under your administration, many students were abducted. Even your verse you quoted is ill-applied. Bishop Kukah's assertion has been justified. Were we like this before you came in? What was the promise you made about feeding the children, and today they can't even go to school due to the fear of abduction?”⁹⁶

“Whenever someone speaks truth to power, you people will respond swiftly. This is not the way governments in advanced countries go. Oppositions plays a key role in the success of every government because they're the last men in the football game. If people are not there to point out lapses, you won't know when you're wrong. I totally disagree with this style of response to every meaningful critic that ought to have return your administration back to track. If any government wants to perform well, he should not only be hearing from those who are part of the government, because they will always play sycophancy, but rather allow room for critics who will tell you where you have not done well.”⁹⁷

“All Bishop Kukah had told the US Congress is true. The evidence is there for all to see. Ambassadors in Nigeria representing foreign countries see what is happening in Nigeria, so what point was Garba Shehu trying to make? [...] Bishop Kukah can no longer go back to his home in Kaduna State. Like most Christians, he is a refugee of sorts in his own country. In just the past week or two, dozens of churches had been torched in Southern Kaduna and dozens killed while, as usual, the government look the other way. But when an Emir in the area was kidnapped the president and state officials made sure he didn't spend more than two days in the hands of his abductors. And they think the world is blind.”⁹⁸

“Kukah is measured, dignified and brave. Garba Shehu is the opposite. Sowing discord among Nigerians is, more than any national government before it, the legacy of the Buhari government. [...] For Shehu to refer to Bishop Kukah as a ‘so-called man of the Church’ is

⁹⁶ Asa Rock Villa [Facebook post], “[STATE HOUSE PRESS RELEASE](#)”, 18 July 2021.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Premium Times Nigeria, “[Presidency attacks Bishop Kukah over statement to U.S. Congress](#)”, 18 July 2021.

brazen. The Roman Catholic Church does not rely on Garba Shehu to tell who their leaders are. Bishop Kukah has spoken the mind of the majority of the people bearing the yoke of the nepotism of the present government.”⁹⁹

“Mr. Garba Shehu... your last words show that you agree that there is insecurity in Nigeria.... I weep for my country.... Whenever anyone says something that you don't like you will disagree vehemently and say that person is telling lies or you would even say it's fake news....”¹⁰⁰

“What a caustic response to a rather apt sermon which ought to have served as basis for self-assessment and obvious review of policies and programmes. Water may cover footprints in the sand but cannot cover the truth. Garba Shehu's rambling on the subject not only further exposes the state of depravity and insensitivity but also buttresses the fact that there is a total disconnect of the administration from the populace and reality.”¹⁰¹

“I stand with Father Kukah. Everything he said about this regime is nothing but the truth. Garba Shehu knows this. Everyone knows it. These are things we voice everyday. If saving Nigeria is beyond their capacity, this regime should consult far and wide for help. No need denying the obvious.”¹⁰²

III. Conclusion and Recommendations

With regards to the information we have presented in sections above to refute claims made in *Response by the Presidency to the Statement Made by Bishop Kukah Before the United States Congress*, published 18 July 2021, we make the following recommendations to the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria:

- 1) Issue either a retraction of *Response by the Presidency to the Statement Made by Bishop Kukah Before the United States Congress* or a correction to address that the bishop (1) did not sensationalize the situation of insecurity in Nigeria; (2) did not make religiously motivated incendiary remarks or list racist tropes; and (3) did not claim Christian schools are the only target for abductions.
- 2) 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.
- 3) With regards to the presidency's admission of the pervasiveness of “herder-farmer disturbances” and mass school abductions, take steps to reinforce security and response training in vulnerable regions throughout Nigeria.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Sodiq Oyeleke, “‘You lied.’ Presidency slams Kukah over virtual address to US congress”, *Punch Nigeria*, 18 July 2021.

¹⁰¹ Johnbosco Agbakwuru, “Your criticism of Buhari ungodly. Presidency replies Bishop Kukah”, *Vanguard*, 4 April 2021.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*