



Jubilee Campaign Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

***Regarding his Call for Input on the rights of persons belonging to religious or
belief minorities in situations of conflict***

THE SAHEL'S BURKINA FASO & NORTHERN NIGERIA

I. Overview of Violence and Insecurity in the Sahel

Within the past few years and especially since 2018, African countries in the Sahel – Mali, Niger, Chad, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire – have experienced an exponential uptick in violence by and between non-state jihadist insurgent groups and government forces. Burkina Faso and Nigeria are two of the worst-affected nations, with civilian deaths on the rise.

II. Violence Targeting Christians in Burkina Faso

One of the worst incidents in the history of the insurgency in Burkina Faso occurred as recently as June 2021, when armed Islamist militants ambushed the northeastern village of Solhan, massacred every person they saw, and set fire to homes and shopfronts; the death toll was no fewer than 132 civilian casualties as a result of the planned attack. It was believed that the ambush was coordinated and executed by either Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) [English: Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM)] or Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)¹, and though both groups initially denied involvement, later that month it was revealed that two members of JNIM were arrested for the massacre and charged with "criminal association, murder, attempted murder, theft, illegal possession of firearms and ammunition and criminal damage, all acts of which were connected to terrorism".² One 10-year-old boy Philip returned to his home with his father, pastor Daniel, to collect necessary food items that they forgot to take with them while fleeing terrorist attacks; the two had hoped that the militants had moved on from the location but Philip was forced to watch as his father was stabbed and shot dead.³

¹ Henry Wilkins, "[Solhan massacre exposes failure to tackle Sahel crisis](#)", *Al Jazeera*, 10 June 2021.

² France24, "[Children killing children: Two detained over Burkina Faso village massacre](#)", 29 June 2021.

³ Release International, "[Christians on Hitlist in Burkina Faso](#)", 8 June 2021.

The June 2021 massacre was just one of the many jihadist attacks that occur nearly every day and leave tens to hundreds of Burkinabè civilians dead and many more injured; International Crisis Group reports that “in 2019, Burkina Faso suffered more jihadist attacks than any other Sahelian country” that year.⁴ Meanwhile, the government has responded by deploying its military – also supported by French troops – to combat militant groups; in reality, these counter-terrorism efforts only exacerbate violence against civilians and have made little success in stemming the activities of jihadist groups. For example, as recently as 27 November 2021, Burkinabè police launched tear gas against civilians who had gathered in Ouagadougou to protest the military’s and French support troops’ inability to curb terrorism; two journalists and a child were injured by the Burkinabè authorities’ violent response to the protest.⁵

Numerous advocacy organizations have highlighted that, while the entire population of Burkina Faso is victim to insecurity and violence brought on by jihadist militant activity, Christians in particular have experienced unique types of persecution due to their faith. In early November 2021, Christians in the Diocese of Dori reported that, while normally terrorists enter villages and ask cattle owner residents to pay taxes per head of cattle and then steal the cattle if the tax amount cannot be paid, they have begun first asking villagers to identify if they are Christian or Muslim; if the resident explains they are Christian, terrorists tell them “that they didn’t just want to take their animals, but also to kill the owners”.⁶ One group of 17 displaced Christians in Dori – consisting of nine elders, a woman, and seven children – explained that they had to wait to escape their village in the middle of the night so that they could avoid the terrorists who were looking for Christians.

In June 2019, terrorists entered the small village of Beni and asked civilians nearby to lay on the ground; the terrorists searched their necks for jewelry and then executed four men who had been wearing crucifixes as identifiers of their Christian faith. Months earlier in April, they disrupted a church service in Silgadji where they demanded worshippers convert to Islam and killed five men wearing crosses.⁷ More recently in February 2020, terrorists attacked the town of Pansi in Yagha province, where they separated male and female citizens located near or at a Protestant church and killed 24 civilians including Christians and Muslims, murdered a pastor, looted oil and rice from local stores, set fire to the aforementioned church, and kidnapped three individuals.⁸ One week prior also in Yagha province, insurgents killed a retired pastor and abducted another. In May 2021, armed insurgents interrupted a baptism ceremony in Adjarara and killed 15 Christian attendees.⁹

The majority of insurgent violence in Burkina Faso takes place in its northern regions, and though Christians account for a large portion of fatalities, civilians have noted that jihadist groups also have been targeted moderate Muslims and imams who have opposed the violence and the beliefs of the extremist groups and instead advocate for peace.¹⁰ One Burkinabè Catholic, Joseph Sere, stated that “I think the group wants to impose a harsh version of Shariah (Islamic law) in the regions they control”. As such, terrorist groups have forced civilians to wear Islamic clothing¹¹ and have targeted schools and killed education professionals for their promotion of secular curriculums.¹²

⁴ International Crisis Group, [Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence](#), 24 February 2020.

⁵ France24, [“Police fire tear gas at protesters as anger over attacks mounts in Burkina Faso”](#), 27 November 2021.

⁶ Aid to the Church in Need, [“Burkina Faso Christians face resurgence of terrorist attacks”](#), 5 November 2021.

⁷ Danielle Paquette, [“Islamist militants are targeting Christians in Burkina Faso: ‘They are planting seeds of a religious conflict’](#), *The Washington Post*, 21 August 2019.

⁸ Sam Mednick & Arsene Kabore, [“Latest Burkina Faso Church Attack Kills 24, Including Pastor”](#), *Christianity Today*, 17 February 2020.

⁹ Reuters, [“Armed men kill 15 at baptism in northern Burkina Faso”](#), 19 May 2021.

¹⁰ Tonny Onyulo, [“‘Continue praying for me,’ says survivor of massacre in Burkina Faso”](#), *Crux Now*, 28 June 2021.

¹¹ United States Department of State, [Burkina Faso 2020 International Religious Freedom Report](#), 12 May 2021.

¹² Human Rights Watch, [Burkina Faso: Armed Islamists Attack Education](#), 26 May 2020.

As a result of the worsening situation of terrorist activity in northern Burkina Faso, more than one million civilians – primarily Christian – have fled their home villages and are internally displaced in locations throughout the country; one pastor lamented that every church in the northern triangle of the nation had been closed down and deserted.¹³ As recently as 1 December 2021, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet expressed her concerns that Burkina Faso is becoming a location of “humanitarian catastrophe”.¹⁴

III. Violence Targeting Christians in Northern Nigeria

In Nigeria’s predominantly Muslim north, Christian communities, worshippers, and churches are facing an existential threat as they are under nearly daily attacks by radical Islamist terrorists including Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and bands of extremist Fulani militants. In October 2021, the Nigeria-based International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law reported that no fewer than 4,400 Nigerian Christians had been killed by jihadists within nine-month period between January and September 2021. Moreover, “not less than 3500 traveler and sedentary Christians have also been abducted in the nine months of 2021 gone by; with several dozens of them feared killed in captivity”.¹⁵

In January 2020, Boko Haram fighters in Borno State kidnapped Reverend Lawan Andimi, chairman of the Christians Association of Nigeria, and beheaded him because he would not renounce Christianity and convert to Islam, and because the militants’ ransom demands went unmet.¹⁶ On Christmas Eve in 2020, Boko Haram militants stormed the predominantly Christian town of Pemi, located in Borno State, where they shot and killed eleven people, burnt down ten homes, and looted food and other supplies that were to be distributed to local Christians for Christmas; the assailants also set fire to a local church, abducted a priest, and stole medical supplies from a hospital.¹⁷ More recently, in July 2021 radical Fulani militants in the North Central state of Kogi abducted Reverend Danlami Yakwoi of Evangelical Church of Winning All (ECWA), who eventually died as a result of the torture he endured in captivity.¹⁸ In late September 2021 numerous attacks took place in both Kano and Kaduna State. On 26 September in Kano’s Sumaila Local Government Area (LGA), a group of radical Muslims attacked and murdered Reverend Yohanna Shuaibu in an act of revenge for his alleged involvement in the religious conversion of a local Muslim to Christianity, and they then went on to burn down his house, church, and missions school.¹⁹ Also on 26 and 27 September in Kaduna State, Fulani militants attacked the Christian communities of Madamai and Abun, killed a total of 49 civilians and kidnapped 27 others.²⁰ On 31 October 2021, radical Fulani militants interrupted a morning worship service at a church in Kaduna State and killed two Christians and abducted many others.²¹ In late November 2021, a Christian

¹³ Tola Mbakwe, [“Christians in Burkina Faso abandoned as Christians flee violence from radical Jihadists”](#), *Christian News*, 30 August 2020.

¹⁴ Sam Mednick, [“UN rights chief: Burkina Faso is facing a security crisis”](#), *Associated Press*, 1 December 2021.

¹⁵ International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law, [“4,400 Christians Hacked To Death By Nigerian Muslim Jihadists In Nine Months \(Jan-Sept 2021\)”](#), 3 October 2021.

¹⁶ Samuel Smith, [“Christian Association of Nigeria demands answers after Boko Haram kills pastor”](#), *The Christian Post*, 22 January 2020.

¹⁷ BBC News, [“Boko Haram kill villagers in Christmas Eve attack”](#), 25 December 2020.

¹⁸ Morning Star News, [“Fulani Herdsmen Kill Pastor in North-Central Nigeria”](#), 28 July 2021.

¹⁹ Sahara Reporters, [“Muslim Mob Allegedly Kills Pastor For Converting Man To Christian In Kano. Razes House, Church, Mission School”](#), 27 September 2021.

²⁰ Charles Collins, [“Dozens killed in Islamist attacks in northern Nigeria”](#), *Crux*, 29 September 2021.

²¹ CHYN Radio, [“Two Christians killed, dozens abducted in attack on church in Nigeria”](#), 5 November 2021.

community in Zamfara State received letters from terrorists demanding that they close down churches or else they will be attacked.²²

While Islamist terrorist groups engage in mass abductions of Nigerian students indiscriminately and regardless of the students' faith, it is important to note that a significant portion of children that have been kidnapped by Boko Haram and ISWAP in recent years were Christian pupils. On 24 August 2020, Fulani militants entered Chikun LGA, where they kidnapped three Christian students and a teacher from the Prince Academy School, and set fire to the local Aminchi Baptist Church; even after some ransom money was paid, they were held until 11 October 2020.²³ On 5 July, suspected Fulani militants abducted nearly 180 students from Bethel Baptist High School in Maraban Rido, Kaduna State(99); in the months following the attack, the majority of the captive students were released appearing "weak, sick and tired".²⁴ One of the most famous mass abductions was the 2018 kidnapping of 110 schoolgirls from Government Girls' Science and Technical College in Dapchi, Yobe State²⁵; while all of the girls were eventually released from captivity, Boko Haram/ISWAP refused to release the sole Christian schoolgirl, then-14-year-old Leah Sharibu, because she repeatedly refused to renounce her faith. Regrettably, Leah still remains in captivity nearly four years later, and it is believed she has been forced to convert to Islam and marry one of her captors, and that she has had two children.²⁶

Regrettably, Nigerian military and police forces have been both unable and unwilling to intervene and eradicate violence against Christians and civilians in general, and in some instances they have been complicit. A 2016 report by the Nigerian presidential committee admitted that police were "saddled with a very large number of unqualified, undertrained and ill-equipped officers and men, many of whose sustainability to wear the respected uniform of the force is in doubt".²⁷ Where the police are ineffective, military troops step in, but they have been similarly unsuccessful at providing security. With no early-warning mechanisms to predict attacks on Christian communities, military forces often arrive at the scene too late and many of the atrocities have already been carried out; authorities have also been known to ignore requests for assistance from communities who fear they may soon be targeted with violence. In August 2021, members of Christian villages in Miango District, Plateau State that were savagely attacked by Fulani militants explained that, even though military forces arrived during the attack, they refrained from intervening to stop the violence; as a result, 70 Christians had been murdered, thousands displaced, and 500 homes were destroyed.²⁸ It is also worth noting that Nigerian police and military forces have been known to engage in police brutality against innocent civilians²⁹ and therefore cannot be reasonably expected to protect their own people, especially faith minorities.

IV. Conclusion & Recommendations

Jubilee Campaign urges members and observer states of the Human Rights Council to:

²² Sahara Reporters, "[EXCLUSIVE: Bandits Write Christians In Zamfara To Shut Down Churches Or Risk Attacks](#)", 29 November 2021.

²³ Crux, "[Kidnapped Christians released in Nigeria](#)", 14 October 2020.

²⁴ Evangelical Focus, "[Two months later, 57 kidnapped students of Bethel Baptist High School freed](#)", 2 September 2021.

²⁵ BBC News, "[Nigeria Dapchi abductions: Schoolgirls finally home](#)", 25 March 2018.

²⁶ Percy Dabang, "[3 Years After, Parents of Nigerian Girl Abducted by Boko Haram Still Plead for Her Release](#)", *Voice of America*, 27 February 2021.

²⁷ Max Siollun, "[Nigeria's Military Is Part of the Problem. It's Also the Solution.](#)", *Foreign Policy*, 7 June 2021.

²⁸ Morning Star News, "[Soldiers Complicit in Herdsmen Attacks in Nigeria, Christians Say](#)", 25 August 2021.

²⁹ Amnesty International, "[Nigeria: No justice for victims of police brutality one year after #EndSARS Protests](#)", 19 October 2021.

1. Call for the Establishment of a mechanism or commission of inquiry to investigate and collect evidence on mass atrocities taking place against religious minorities in the Sahel of Africa, in particular Nigeria and Burkina Faso, as well as other vulnerable countries such as Chad, Cameroon, Mali, and Niger.³⁰

³⁰ Folahanmi Aina, "[Mapping the contours of Jihadist groups in the Sahel](#)", *The Conversation*, 24 September 2021.