

The House of Commons' Subcommittee on International
Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs
and International Development:
Study of the Current Human Rights Situation in Nigeria

Friday 28th April 2023

2:00pm EST

Jubilee Campaign Opening Statement

Check Against Delivery

We would like to thank the members of the House of Commons' Subcommittee on International Human Rights for inviting Jubilee Campaign to shed some light on the dire human rights situation in Nigeria and its implications for the wider Sahel region in Africa. Jubilee Campaign works to promote the human rights and religious liberty of ethnic and faith minorities and the release of religious prisoners of conscience. Our remarks today will, therefore, focus on the human rights violations of freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief and how these violations are coupled with violations on the right to life, torture and other degrading and inhumane treatment.

Since the turn of the millennium, Islamist jihadist militant group Boko Haram has been terrorizing the citizens of Nigeria- in particular, Christians and non-jihadist peaceful Muslims- throughout northern and central Nigeria. Throughout 2014 and 2015, this violence reached a critical point. The escalating violence caused the Nigerian military, in cooperation with forces from Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Benin to launch an anti-terrorism initiative which temporarily incapacitated Boko Haram insurgency by destroying the group's bases in northern provinces. By December 2015, Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari had claimed that the initiative had "technically defeated" Boko Haram. However, in the seven years since this declaration, militant violence has exponentially increased and new actors – such as Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and bands of Islamist Fulani militants – have taken on roles in the violence, including executions and inhuman and degrading treatment of civilians [cutting of limbs], the burning of homes and places of worship, kidnapping and enslavement of women and girls and coerced conversions, Leah Sharibu one notable case.

The UNHCR recorded as of November 2021, at least 3.0 million internally displaced Nigerians, with the majority of Nigerians being displaced in parts of North-East Nigeria and the country's Middle Belt, areas where Fulani Islamist violence and other criminal gang attacks are concentrated, but also in North-West Nigeria. UNICEF reports over 1 million children are afraid of returning to school due to the violence and kidnappings by these criminal gangs.

In 2020, we submitted a report to the International Criminal Court entitled *This Genocide is Loading*, in which we argued that jihadist Fulani militants had increasingly engaged in crimes against humanity and genocidal acts in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. We cited statistics compiled by the Global Terrorism Index and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project which estimated that from 2001 to 2020, no fewer than 60,000 citizens have perished as a result of militant violence in Nigeria. The endless spate of violent attacks that have occurred over the past two years however, have added to the already staggering casualty statistics. In January 2023, Open Doors reported new numbers for 2022, where 5,014 Christians were killed by Islamists and other militant groups, nearly 90 percent of the total number of Christians killed worldwide.

Only just this week on Wednesday Morning Star News reported 11 days of attacks, where Fulani militants killed 18 people and wounded others in predominantly Christian villages of Plateau state, Nigeria.

Crimes against humanity are comprised of *any one* of the following acts “when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack”: (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 acts “intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health”. Acts of genocide similarly include the killing of members of a group, the infliction of harm, and additionally imposing conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part. The commission of *any one* of these acts constitutes crimes against humanity and genocide. Throughout the militant crisis in Nigeria, *every one* of these have been committed.

The Observatory of Religious Freedom in Africa reported last year that between October 2019 and September 2021, jihadist assailants – including Fulani militants, Boko Haram, and ISWAP – had killed 8,560 Nigerian Christians and 2,417 Muslims. Militants have attacked churches, such as on Pentecostal Sunday in 2022 when they ambushed St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church during Mass services and slaughtered 40 worshippers and injuring an additional 80 civilians. Insurgents have abducted girls from schools. One of the 110 girls kidnapped by ISWAP from a school in Dapchi, then-14-year-old Christian girl Leah Sharibu, remains in captivity to this day because she repeatedly refused to embrace Islam. After years of pressure, she has since been coerced into religious conversion, marriage to a militant, and has given birth to two children by the age of 18.

Islamist militants, however, are not the sole perpetrators of such heinous atrocities. In May 2022 in Sokoto State, Christian university student Deborah Yakubu was stoned to death and set on fire on her college campus by her very own classmates for her allegedly “blasphemous” remarks; days prior, she had angered her classmates by questioning why their WhatsApp group chat had been used to discuss religious matters rather than school issues. Despite that the perpetrators of Deborah’s murder were easily identifiable in the video of the attack which circulated the internet, they remain at large nearly a year later.

In 12 northern states of Nigeria, where sharia penal codes are applied, the death penalty can be a sanction for blasphemy. These anti-blasphemy laws have caused the imprisonment and barbaric sentencing of citizens simply for practicing their right to expression. In August 2020, the Hausawa Filin Hockey upper-Sharia court sentenced Sufi gospel singer Yahaya Sharif-Aminu to death for allegedly praising an imam in one of his songs to the point of elevating him above the Prophet. While his death sentence was overturned through the hard work of lawyer Kola Alapinni and his team – including Muslim lawyers - his sentence was overturned, but only on procedural grounds and his case was sent for retrial, where he could face the death sentence. The legal team are now working to challenge the constitutionality of trying Yahaya under the sharia laws in Northern Nigeria and EU resolution

Jubilee Campaign calls on Canada to:

- Lead efforts at the United Nations Human Rights Council to establish a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the violence that remains unmitigated in Nigeria, especially the violence committed by Islamist jihadist militias, noting that the International Criminal Court investigation does not cover ongoing violations occurring the Middle Belt regions or perpetrated by other actors such as the by Fulani Islamist militants and other criminal gangs, including the enslavement and coerced conversions of women and girls by criminal gangs [This echoes the recommendation from the November 2020 meeting which called for an Observation Mission – due to COVID-19 however, the idea was put on pause.];

- Work on implementing the language in the UN General Assembly resolution on the moratorium on the death penalty calling for the removal of the sanction of the death penalty for exercising human rights, including the repeal of Nigeria's anti-blasphemy laws;

- Review funds from the Canadian High Commission in Nigeria to ensure that funding leaves no one behind, bringing attention to the impunity surrounding the coerced conversions and child marriages of minority women and girls. While we welcome the efforts to address sexual and gender-based violence in Kano state Nigeria, the report released from the project does not address the kidnapping and coerced conversion of minority women and girls that was [flagged](#) by the UN Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of women and girls during a United Nations Human Rights Council parallel event sponsored by Jubilee Campaign.

We hope this meeting will garner united resolve and action by the Canadian Parliament as we have seen in the EU, with a resolution passing nearly unanimously in support of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu and the repeal of its egregious anti-blasphemy laws.

Thank you for this honor and for bringing much needed attention to this issue.