

SOS Letter on Nigeria from Concerned Groups

December 17, 2021

**The Honorable Antony Blinken
U.S. Secretary of State
Department of State (Office of the Secretary)
Room 7226
Harry S. Truman Building
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520, USA**

Dear Secretary Blinken,

The State Department's removal of Nigeria from the designation of 'Country of Particular Concern' (CPC) in terms of religious freedoms

We, the individuals and groups listed below, are all involved in supporting Nigerian Christians who are persecuted for their faith. Some of us are also members of the CAN Nigeria Justice Project which is supporting the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in its endeavour to secure justice for Christian victims of international crimes at the International Criminal Court.

After years of governmental neglect and complicity, Nigeria is in the throes of systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious and other freedoms alongside a broader collapse of the little law and order that previously existed. This is a country that has been under scrutiny by the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court since 18 November 2010, with a decision by the Prosecutor on 11 December 2020 to seek leave to open an investigation into Crimes against Humanity and War Crimes.

The situation is spiralling out of control. As you will surely know, in July 2021, Bishop Hassan Matthew Kukah of Sokoto Diocese addressed the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee on Religious Freedom in Nigeria. He shared the horrendous situation of Christians in the country, and reported how in addition to the physical elimination of clergy and Church agents, the persecutors engaged in the total or partial destruction of Church related infrastructure such as churches, schools, convents, health facilities, and presbyteries across the country. Reverend Dr. Samson Olasupo Ayokunle, President of the Christian Association of Nigeria, has emphasised that Boko Haram and the Islamic State offshoot known as ISWAP are "hell-bent on wiping away Christians and Christianity from Nigeria" especially in the Northeast. The EYN-Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (Church of the Brethren in Nigeria) continues to reel from the effects of Boko Haram attacks. Some dioceses in the North East such as Maiduguri and Yola have been devastated and priests have had to leave their parishes after they were attacked, buildings were destroyed, and the congregations scattered in terror. Islamist extremism has spread across to the North Central, North West and South, with armed Fulani herdsmen devastating Christian farmlands and farmers. A potent mix of Boko Haram, armed Fulani herdsmen, armed 'bandits' and imported foreign fighters is developing. Many Christians in States such as Benue, Plateau, Yobe, Borno, Niger, Southern Kaduna, etc. are systematically being uprooted from their ancestral homelands.

By its dereliction of the duties to prevent, protect and punish, Nigeria has fuelled religious violence and stoked the culture of impunity. We attach shocking statistical data from the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA) over the period 1 October 2019 till 30 September 2021 as an annexe to this letter. Among its insights into religious killings across Nigeria are the following. Jihadist attackers killed 8,560 Christians, and some of the 2,417 murdered Moslems in this period. There is certainly some extent of inter-religious violence, but the disproportionate number of Christians killed by jihadists does not make persecution a non-issue. The statistics we have attached do not show the lives lost and being lost in the dreadful conditions of displacement. Christians are being forced from their lands and livelihoods and end up displaced, traumatised, living under very poor circumstances and with no chance for return or adequate resettlement. There are, according to the government's own figures for 2021, 1.7 million displaced persons in Benue State alone. Here it is very clear to see the government's dereliction of duties – the Churches and host Christian communities have had to step into the breach because of the government's deliberate neglect of the existential needs of these most vulnerable persons. The lands of the displaced are commandeered by those who drove them out, without sanction from the authorities. Children are regularly kidnapped from their schools, particularly young Christian girls. Clergy are attacked on what appear to be religious grounds. Converts to Christianity are attacked with impunity. In public and private life, Christians are treated as second class citizens. 'Repentant terrorists' who have committed crimes against Christians are not being punished, while Christians who defend themselves are and they receive the harshest penalties. In the time that Nigeria has been recognised as a CPC, it has not just failed to protect Christians and certain categories of Moslems from such crimes, but has acted in an imbalanced way that is discriminatory and fuels tension between the communities.

We are therefore appalled and baffled that just one year after being listed as a CPC, the U.S. Department of State has removed Nigeria's designation. Neither you nor your Department have provided any explanation for this extraordinary turnaround, which comes despite their having been absolutely no improvement in Nigeria. On the contrary, the abuse of religious and other freedoms has escalated. The evidence is all around, and has been made available to the State Department. In April 2021, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom had recommended to your Department that Nigeria remain on the list because of the "violence by militant Islamists and other non-state armed actors, as well as discrimination, arbitrary detentions, and capital blasphemy sentences by state authorities" in the country. That commission has already publicly expressed its outrage and disappointment in the delisting of Nigeria.

In his personal statement in protest at the US action, The Reverend Dr. Gideon Para-Mallam, President/CEO of The Para-Mallam Peace Foundation emphasised the complex, systemic and structural nature of religious persecution in Nigeria. He also asked "What has changed in Nigeria?". What has changed is that the persecution of Christians has become even worse. However, the egregious situation at the State Department goes further; while Nigeria was removed from the CPC list, Boko Haram and ISWAP were named in the Entities of Particular Concern list. Like the Reverend Dr. Para-Mallam, we ask, how is it that a country recognised by your department to be facing such a serious Islamist terror threat, is at the same time dropped from the CPC list?

When you visited Abuja last month, one of those who met with you was the Reverend John Joseph Hayab, Chairman of CAN in Kaduna State, which has been particularly hard hit by anti-Christian violence. In public comments, Reverend Hayab called your delisting decision “appalling” and pointed out that “only a day before” your visit, the kidnappers of 66 worshippers from the Emmanuel Baptist Church released a video showing themselves killing some of their captives. That same video showed them threatening to attack Christians and to make them suffer. He asked “How could a country where such a crime is ongoing without any tangible efforts by the government to halt the evil be removed from the list of countries where religious persecution is a problem?”.

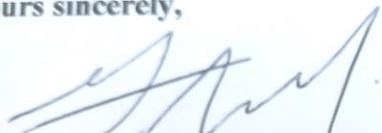
In his protest about the delisting issued through the Vatican media, Bishop Emmanuel Adetoyese Badejo of Oyo Diocese has spoken about the failings of the Nigerian government which has “carried on as if all is well, refusing at every turn to declare as terrorists the extremists behind the wanton destruction, grave abuse of human rights and mayhem.” The Bishop has emphasised discriminatory practices: “There is almost complete lack of interest on the part of the Federal Government to help Christians who have been kidnapped en masse, and the Churches concerned have simply had to pay heavy sums for the freedom of their members. On the other hand, the media office of the Federal Government springs to overdrive whenever it perceives any resistance or legislation to the aggression and the occupation moves of the Muslim Fulani herdsmen who have become a menace everywhere in the country.”

Mr. Secretary, 10 days after your visit and 14 days after the delisting of Nigeria from the CPC, Christians in Zamfara State were warned to shut down all their Churches or face the consequences. With all due respect, the Department of State’s failure to re-designate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern denies abundant evidence of religious persecution that is spiralling out of control. It further demoralises victims, many of whom looked to the USA as a beacon of humanity and moral standards. It encourages the Nigerian government in its dereliction of duties to promote, prevent, and protect human rights, in its failure to punish perpetrators and in its complicity with those private actors who are persecuting others on the grounds of their religion. We have no doubt that this ill-judged action will fuel the ongoing commission of international crimes in Nigeria. This will put the USA itself at risk of being held complicit with Nigeria under the law of State responsibility. It is most certainly not consistent with America’s international obligations to encourage another State in not breaching International Law in this way.

We recall how the newly inaugurated President Biden visited the State Department on 4 February 2021 and promised that restoring America’s place in the world “must start with diplomacy rooted in America’s most cherished democratic values: defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating every person with dignity.” That has not been fulfilled with the delisting of Nigeria as a CPC. Like others, we wonder at the timing of this development, announced just a day before you visited Nigeria to discuss furthering cooperation on “global health security, expanding energy access and economic growth, and revitalizing democracy.”

In light of all the above, we urge you to reconsider your decision and take up the matter of religious persecution in Nigeria with the seriousness that it deserves. We would be pleased to engage directly with you and your office, whether to provide you with substantiation of the matters that we raise in this letter or in relation to other matters arising. Our contact person is Professor Yusufu Turaki, who can be reached by email at turakiyusufu1@gmail.com and by telephone at +234 802 626 8546.

Yours sincerely,

 17th December 2021
Professor Yusufu Turaki, for the Yusufu Turaki Foundation

Supporting individuals and organisations:

1. *Reverend Dr. Testimony Onifade*, for EDAPI (Nigeria Baptist Convention)
2. *Pastor James Akinyele*, for the Nigerian Evangelical Fellowship
3. *Pastor Philip Nwaegeruo*, for the Nigeria Christian Graduate Fellowship
4. *Professor John Akintayo*, for the Christian Lawyers' Fellowship of Nigeria (CLASFON)
5. *Dr. Gloria Puldu*, for the Leah Foundation
6. *Pastor Ayo Adedoyin*, for the International Organisation for Peace and Social Justice (UK)
7. *Mr. Emmanuel Ogebe*, for Justice for Jos and the US Nigeria Law Group, Washington DC.
8. *Dr. Joshua Jama*, for Nigerian Christians in Diaspora (NCiD) and the Pentecostal Community Association UK
9. *Professor Ngozi and Dr. Chikezie Okike*, for Online Prayer Altar for Leah Sharibu and the Persecuted Church
10. *Mr. Nuhu Haruna*, for the Hausa Christian Fellowship (UK)
11. *Professor John Durodola*, for the Overseas Fellowship of Nigerian Christians (UK)
12. *Dr. John Eibner*, President, Christian Solidarity International
13. *The Baroness Cox*, Independent member of the House of Lords, UK Parliament
14. *Pastor Stephen Enada and Mr. Kyle Abts*, for the International Committee on Nigeria (ICON)
15. *Mr. Chris Badley*, for Release International
16. *Reverend Tade Agbesanwa*, for LoveJustice (UK)
17. *Mr. Christophe Foltzenlogel*, for European Centre for Law and Justice

cc Ambassador Mary Beth Leonard, U.S. Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Nigeria