



INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM  
ROUNDTABLE

25 August 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C St NW  
Washington, DC 20520  
secretary@state.gov

*Letter Calling on the State Department to Redesignate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern*

Dear Secretary Blinken:

We, the undersigned, are a group of individuals and organizations that advocate for human rights and freedom of religion and belief around the world. We represent diverse religious, non-religious, and ethnic backgrounds but are united in our goal of promoting freedom of religion or belief for all. As you prepare to designate Countries of Particular Concern for nations who have “engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom,” we ask that you redesignate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC).

Nigeria faces multiple intertwining crises, which have all worsened over the last year. Where these crises involve violations of religious freedom, they are egregious, systematic, and ongoing. The Nigerian government now appears to be simply unwilling to stop terrorists in the Northeast who continue to target and murder both Christians and Muslims who reject their extremist ideology, and who are increasingly affiliated with militants in the Northwest and Middle Belt. A recent study reported that at least 3,462 Christians have been murdered for their faith in 2021, a number which has nearly surpassed those killed in all of 2020. Priests are regularly kidnapped, and churches and mosques regularly destroyed. If the Nigerian government will not provide security, cycles of retaliatory violence are likely to increase.

Militant groups have targeted Christian and Muslim schools with abductions, disproportionately targeting girls and Christian students. The state response to the attacks on schools has been to close them. Most recently Kaduna state authorities ordered 13 schools shut after the abduction of 140 students from Bethel Baptist High School. The United Nations children's agency, UNICEF, estimates that more than 1,120 schools are closed across northwestern Nigeria. According to conservative estimates armed men have abducted at least 950 students for ransom since December 2020, six of whom were murdered by their abductors. In addition, abductors exploit the children, subjecting them to sexual violence or other forms of torture, using them as suicide bombers, child soldiers, and sex slaves. After years of captivity, the Christian teenager Leah Sharibu still remains held by the Islamic State West Africa Province for refusing to convert to Islam.

Both Sharia and blasphemy laws in the North have been used against individuals of various backgrounds, including Sufis, Humanists, Christians, and LGBT persons. Mubarak Bala and Yahaya Sharif-Aminu remain in detention in Kano state for alleged blasphemy. In the North, a blasphemy conviction can lead to the death penalty for those tried under Sharia law. In the Northwest, Shi'a Muslims face regular harassment and attacks.

The Nigerian authorities also harass individuals who raise concerns about the increased violence, kidnappings, and government inaction. The government has accused them of politicizing the situation and "blaming the government under the able leadership of President Muhammadu Buhari," while also detaining some arbitrarily for lengthy periods. The government has since 2019 criticized the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial and arbitrary executions, the UK All Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, and Catholic Archbishop Matthew Hassan Kukah, who was accused of lying after he spoke out about the kidnappings of schoolchildren during a Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission congressional hearing in July 2021.

But the crises facing Nigeria go beyond freedom of religion or belief and extend to a broader array of human rights violations and rule of law issues. Last year, Nigeria saw countrywide protests against police brutality and the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), who have committed atrocities against everyday Nigerians. These came to a bloody end when the security services opened fire on unarmed protestors and carried away bodies to obscure the true death toll. President Buhari also is increasingly attempting to close civic spaces and shut down dissent, with his recent Twitter ban and attempted prosecutions of social media users being the most blatant example. President Buhari's only response to widespread banditry, kidnappings, and secessionist movements in the Southeast seems to be the commission of further human rights abuses.

In sum, the religious freedom and human rights situation in Nigeria has only worsened over the past year. With only a limited set of tools available to address Nigeria's human rights and religious freedom abuses, now is not the time to relent on pressuring the Nigerian government to take effective action. Lifting the CPC designation would only embolden President Buhari's increasingly authoritarian administration and send the wrong signal to the Nigerian people. Instead, the CPC designation should remain as a pressure point in diplomatic engagements with the Nigerian government.

We thank you for your consideration.

Best regards,

### **Organizations**

21Wilberforce  
ADF International  
Africa Faith and Justice Network  
American Humanist Association  
Anglican Persecuted Church Network  
Bellwether International  
Boat People SOS - Religious Freedom Project  
Center for Pluralism  
Christian Freedom International  
Christian Solidarity International  
Church of the Brethren, Office of Peacebuilding and Policy  
Church of Scientology National Affairs Office  
Citizen Power Initiatives for China  
Coptic Solidarity

Faith & Liberty  
GAFCON Suffering Church Network  
Genocide Watch  
Greentree Global  
Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities (HRCBM)  
Humanists UK  
Ignition633 Ministries  
International Christian Concern  
International Committee on Nigeria  
Jubilee Campaign  
Justice for All  
Katartismos Global  
LEAH Foundation  
Legalise Apostasy  
Masjid Muhammad, The Nation's Mosque  
New Wineskins Missionary Network  
Open Doors USA  
Parity  
Prayer Pioneers  
Religious Freedom Coalition  
Revealing Light Ministries  
Save the Persecuted Christians  
Set My People Free  
Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission  
Stefanus Alliance  
United Macedonian Diaspora

### **Individuals**

The Baroness Cox  
*Independent Member of the House of Lords and Founder President of Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART)*

Lela Gilbert  
*Senior Fellow for International Religious Freedom  
Coalitions Coordinator  
Family Research Council  
Adjunct Fellow, Center for Religious Freedom  
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Ghaidaa Hetou  
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Lauren Homer  
*President  
Law and Liberty Trust International*

Paul Marshall  
*Distinguished Professor  
Baylor University*

Scott Morgan  
*President*  
*Red Eagle Enterprises*

Iyabo Obasanjo  
*Assistant Professor*  
*College of William & Mary*

Patrice J. Pederson  
*President*  
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*Former MP of Myanmar*

Nina Shea  
*Director, Center for International Religious Freedom*  
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