

POLICY BRIEF



Nigeria

Addressing the violence against Christian communities

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and a major political and economic force in West Africa and the continent at large.

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria recognizes a wide range of fundamental rights – such as the right to life, right to human dignity and right to freedom of conscience and religion – to which Nigeria is internationally committed to respect.¹

Religion plays a key role in the Nigerian society: the two major religions are Christianity and Islam, representing 46.5% and 46.1% of the population respectively. A historic rivalry between the predominantly Muslim north and Christian south has dramatically intensified with the spread of radical Islam. In particular with

the expansion of terrorist groups like Boko Haram in the northeast and the increasing violence between predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and predominantly Christian farmers, but disproportionately against the latter, in the Middle Belt region.²

The scale of the problem

The extent and impact of this violence is appalling: an estimate of more than 35,000 people were killed since Boko Haram's insurgency started in 2009,³ while at least 3,641 people were killed between January 2016 and October 2018 in the herder-farmer conflict (57% of them in 2018 alone).⁴

¹ Chapter IV, Art. 33-46, *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*, available at: <http://ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/54097/71263/F728467428/NGA54097.pdf>.

² "Nigeria: Country Dossier", *World Watch Research*, January 2019, p. 8. Available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Nigeria-WWR-COUNTRY-DOSSIER-January-2019-update.pdf> (password: freedom).

³ Campbell, Harwood, "Boko Haram's Deadly Impact", *Council of Foreign Relations*, August 2018. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/article/boko-harams-deadly-impact>.

⁴ "Nigeria: The Harvest of Death - Three Years of Bloody Clashes Between Farmers and Herders in Nigeria", *Amnesty International*, December 2018. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/9503/2018/en/>.

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Herder-farmer violence

Currently, the herder-farmer conflict has become Nigeria's most serious security challenge. Six times deadlier than Boko Haram in 2018, it has displaced hundreds of thousands and intensified ethnic and religious divisions in the country.⁵ The conflict has complex and often disputed root causes, but the reality is the conflict deprives an increasing number of people of their homes, human dignity, and lives on a daily basis.

The Nigerian Government's inadequate response to the escalating crisis⁶ fosters impunity and heavily questions the Nigerian Security Forces (NSF) and its accountability. There are many concerning reports of willful negligence, or at worst, complicity, by the NSF in deadly attacks against Christian farmer communities. NSF officers reportedly abandoned villagers seeking protection from Fulani herders, ignored credible warnings of imminent attacks and did not arrest known attackers.⁷ In February 2016, the Nigerian Government established a Human Rights Desk for the army aimed at investigating and curbing human rights violations by NSF officials. Special focus has been given to violations by the Boko Haram insurgency,⁸ but not on alleged violations NSF committed in the herder-farmer conflict.

This climate of impunity also intensifies the scale of proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) in the country. Fulani herders attacking farmer communities reportedly have access to military-grade weapons, like machine guns and AK-type rifles.⁹ This cocktail of *inadequate government response, negligence, complicity by the NSF and proliferation of SALWs* results in an extreme level of insecurity, which particularly affects Christian communities.

State Governors – Taraba and Benue states – whose territory has been highly affected by the conflict, endeavored to respond with laws prohibiting open-grazing for Fulani herders. However, these laws have further strained herder-farmer relations and resulted in more violence. State Governors allegedly did not consult the affected parties before enacting the laws and thus did not accommodate the parties' interests. Furthermore, these laws potentially conflict with federal laws and constitutional provisions (e.g. constitutional provision for freedom of movement). Compounding the problem outdated federal law designates old corridors for passage of livestock that often do not correspond to the current level of population and farmland available.¹⁰

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⁵ Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence, International Crisis Group, July 2018. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/262-stopping-nigerias-spiralling-farmer-herder-violence>.

⁶ <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/nigeria/>.

⁷ Amnesty International, *Ibid.*, pp., 50-57.

⁸ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/NigeriacreatesamilitaryHumanRightsDesk.aspx>.

⁹ Amnesty International, *Ibid.*, pp. 50-61; 35-37.

¹⁰ "The implications of the Open Grazing Prohibitions & Ranches Establishment Law on farmer-herder relations in the Middle Belt of Nigeria", *Search for Common Ground*, December 2017.



Photo: Nigerian Christian working in a vocational training school in North Eastern Nigeria.

Boko Haram: an unfinished business

Despite Buhari's declaration that Boko Haram was militarily defeated in 2015, its militants, although no longer capable of conducting large-scale attacks, are still more than capable of conducting attacks – which includes abducting Christian women and girls, causing wounds and trauma to whole communities and families and destabilizing security in Nigeria. Militants have held some hostages for years – some Chibok girls, the most well-known example, remain captive – and the families of hostages seldom receive updates on the government's efforts to release them.¹¹

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A military solution to the crisis is insufficient to address the root causes of the formation of such militia groups and prevent further radicalization. Comprehensive programs aimed at disseminating counter-radical narratives, addressing distrust between communities and NSF, and aimed at targeting socio-economic factors that create discontent and disillusionment in young generations, should be promoted and encouraged especially in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states.



Photo: Young Nigerian woman attending trauma care after a Fulani militant attack on her community.

¹¹ <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/10/leah-sharibus-mother-pleads-to-nigerian-president-as-kidnappers-threaten-to-kill-leah/>.



Photo: A pastor in his church which is being rebuilt after Boko Haram violence, North Eastern Nigeria.

To ensure the respect of fundamental rights of the Nigerian people, especially Christian communities, which are currently being repeatedly violated, Open Doors recommends:

1 To prevent **impunity** and ensure **institutional accountability** the International Community should:

- Liaise and cooperate with the Nigerian Army Human Rights Desk, and urge the Desk to investigate and prosecute violations from armed forces in the Middle Belt. Training programs on international human rights standards, including religious tolerance, should be an integral part of the mandate and work of the Desk;
- Urge the Nigerian Government to ensure the domestication of the *Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons* into national law and ensure its full and effective implementation.

2 To prevent **further violence between herders and farmers**, the International Community should:

- Encourage the Federal Government to review and update the existing regulations on corridors for passage of livestock under the current context and work with State Governors to create a cohesive body of federal and state laws to address the issue;
- Work alongside Benue and Taraba states and with states that might introduce laws prohibiting open-grazing – such as Plateau state – to amend or draft them in accordance to the relevant provisions at Federal level, and establish land specifically reserved for grazing, including a compensation system when land is acquired from farmers;

- Encourage State Governors to create a monitoring mechanism that relays all information from top to bottom and vice versa to alert in the case of violations to the law or attempted threats to grazing areas or passage corridors;
- Urge State Governors to include, when possible, consultations with all affected parties and endeavor to find a formulation that will be embraced by all parties.

3 To combat **Boko Haram** and **further radicalization** the International Community should:

- Urge the Nigerian President to continue his efforts to liberate the hostages held by Boko Haram, including young Christian girls such as L. Sharibu and the Chibok girls who are still held captive, and to create a position within the Government for the sole purpose of maintaining an active family liaison and an open and accessible channel of communication with the traumatized parents of the hostages;
- Support a holistic approach to ensure a process of deradicalization in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states, supporting and funding community-focused programs of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the region aimed at targeting the socio-economic factors that contribute the spreading of extremist ideals. Reforms to educational programs and curricula aimed at providing inclusive education focused on inter-faith and inter-religious studies should be an essential focus of such programs.

Any questions? Please email advocacy@od.org