

Foreign Secretary's Independent Review of FCO support for Persecuted Christians

ORAL EVIDENCE ON PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN NIGERIA

Introduction

Release International staff members have visited Nigeria on numerous occasions over the past 10 – 15 years. During the course of these trips we have met and interviewed many Christians who have suffered violent persecution – or who have seen loved ones killed by Islamists.

Nigeria has a secular constitution, which grants freedom of religion. However, since 1999 twelve states in the north have implemented, or partly implemented, Muslim *Sharia* law.

In many countries where they suffer extreme oppression or persecution, Christians are a small minority. In Nigeria, however, Christians make up a significant portion of the population.

Persecution

Nevertheless, the toll of martyrdom and violence perpetrated against Christians and Christian communities in Nigeria this century has been horrendous.

Frustratingly for Release, the persecution of Christians in Nigeria has often been portrayed in the Western media as “sectarian or communal violence/conflict”, which *wrongly* suggests ‘tit for tat’ acts of aggression in both directions. It is nothing of the sort. In many parts of the country – particularly in the North East – there has been a systematic attempt to ‘wipe Christianity off the map’ and to Islamise the nation. In the north the group known as *Boko Haram* has inflicted horrendous acts of aggression on Christian communities. Across the middle belt of the country Islamist Fulani herdsmen, often heavily armed with military weaponry (which itself begs many uncomfortable questions) have repeatedly attacked Christian communities.

Here are just a few sample examples from Release trips in recent years.

2013

We met Florence Zubairu, a lady living in the capital Abuja, but who had recently fled from the North East. Four months earlier a group of eight armed Islamists forced their way into her Maiduguri home at night. They asked her her religion. She said: “You know we are Christians; that is why we are here.” One man said: “We’ve been telling you people to convert to Islam, but you refuse. So the only thing is to get rid of you.” They shot dead her teenage son and two of her nephews who were staying. They took many of her possessions outside and burned them and began preaching that Nigeria has to be an Islamic country.

We met Pastor John Doro. Fulani Muslims attacked the Christian community in the Plateau State where he was a pastor, killing 67 people, including his wife and his children.

We met Yakubu Dauda, a young Christian who remarkably survived a Muslim execution. He was dragged out of his house at night, his hands were tied behind his back; he was laid face down and

his neck slit from the rear. Left for dead he recovered consciousness and managed to crawl to a neighbour's house for help. He stripped off his shirt to show me the appalling scars across his shoulders and the back of his neck – all for being a Christian.

2014

Release staff travelled south to Benue State; the furthest south we have been where there has been violence against Christians. Near the state capital of Makurdi we met two sizeable communities of displaced people who had fled outlying villages after attacks by Fulani Muslims.

We met Martha, whose three sons were shot and then butchered by Fulanis at the family home. We met Jerome, whose brother was shot and butchered when Fulanis attacked their home, shouting Islamic chants as they did so. We met Dominic who told us of 28 people in his village killed when Fulani attacked during Christian celebrations the previous Easter. Some were shot, some were macheted. We met Solomon, who still bore the scars of a machete attack a month earlier. His wife was killed in the attack. We met many others with similar stories.

Christian leaders spoke of Fulani herdsmen attacking in groups as large as 200-300 people, armed with sophisticated weaponry such as AK47s. Repeatedly over the years it has been claimed that these Muslim herdsmen are being armed – either from within Nigeria, or further afield.

The day we travelled north to Jos we heard of four villages on the outskirts that had been attacked overnight. The following day we entered two of them. More than 170 houses had been burned in the attack. Smoke and ash were still in the air. The local church was gutted.

We met Danjuma, a retired policeman, who described the attack and spoke of local security forces actually helping the Fulani mount the attack (this is not an isolated case of this being reported).

We met Samuel. Special Task Force members had told his family to stay in their home, rather than fleeing. Samuel had fled. Eight members of his family were burned alive in their home.

2017

A team from Release visited an IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camp on the outskirts of Jos. Dozens of families were forced to live in incredibly basic, refugee-like conditions, having fled from attacks by Islamists on their communities.

We met Linus. He is from Pulka, near Gwoza, a base for Christian work over the past 40 years which has now been virtually 'wiped clean' of Christianity by Islamists. "Boko Haram members came to where we lived. They said they don't want to see any Christians in the community." Even before then they had denied Christians job opportunities, particularly in local government. "They took our farmland by force."

Then in August of 2014 they attacked. "They killed five of my neighbours," he said. "They said, 'If Jesus Christ can save you, let him save you.'" Linus and others fled over the border to Cameroon. "It was the only way to escape. In one district they killed 15 men in one day. It was terrible. I didn't expect to survive," he said.

2018

We met Isaac and Hirade, a couple now living in Jos, who each thought the other had been killed when their village, in the Gwoza hills, was attacked by Boko Haram. The first attack took place during a church service. Five people were killed.

Three days later a larger group of Boko Haram came in a truck and armed vehicles and dressed in military uniforms. They appeared friendly, and the whole village came out to greet them. At the same time other Boko Haram people surrounded the outskirts of the village.

At that point they began chanting *Allahu Akbar* and started shooting. More than 100 people were killed, mainly men. People started fleeing – only to run into the ambush. Isaac was shot at as he fled; a bullet scraped his back. They now live further south in a one-room house, divided into two by a curtain, and are being supported by a local church.

Conclusion

These individual stories are just snapshot illustrations of a much, much bigger picture. One of Release's on-the-ground partners claim as many as 6,000 Christians were killed and 50,000 displaced in the first half of last year (2018) alone.

The violence is clearly being perpetrated:

- (a) by Islamists
- (b) against Christians or what would be identified as Christian communities
- (c) seemingly with an aim of eradicating Christianity and forcibly establishing Nigeria as an Islamist state.

The security forces often seem unable – or unwilling – to defend Christian communities in the central and northern parts of the country. Over the years we have heard reports of local security officers 'turning a blind eye' or even being complicit in attacks – presumably if a senior officer is in sympathy with the Islamist agenda.

Repeatedly there have been calls for the government of Nigeria to do more to protect Christians in the north and central belt of the country. However, the number of attacks and atrocities continue to escalate.

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