

NIGERIA 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution bars the federal and state governments from adopting a state religion, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for individuals' freedom to choose, practice, propagate, or change their religion. Throughout the year, Shia Muslims, under the auspices of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), conducted a series of demonstrations – including several in July against the ongoing detention of IMN leader Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky – resulting in violent confrontations between protesters and security forces, which left as many as 30 dead, including protesters and police. Security forces fired on Shia religious processions for Ashura in September, killing 12, according to the IMN. Following the July violence, the government banned the IMN and declared the group a terrorist organization. The IMN stated it planned to legally contest the ban. In July the Catholic Archbishop of Abuja, Cardinal John Onaiyekan, criticized the government's action banning the IMN as a threat to religious freedom for all believers, according to local and Catholic media. The government continued its detention of El-Zakzaky despite a December 2016 court ruling that he be released by January 2017. The government launched new security operations in the North West states and continued ongoing operations in the North Central states that it stated were meant to stem insecurity created by armed criminal gangs and violent conflict over land and water resources, which frequently involved predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and settled farmers, who were both Muslim and Christian. There were several incidents of violence involving these groups in the North Central and North West. In July local communities reacted to news of a government plan to resettle the predominantly Muslim Fulani herdsmen in southern parts of the country by threatening violence against Fulani communities in South West and South East states; the plan was later annulled. Members of both Christian and Muslim groups continued to report some state and local government laws discriminated against them, including by limiting their rights to freedom of expression and assembly and in obtaining government employment.

Terrorist groups including Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa (ISIS-WA) attacked population centers and religious targets and maintained a growing ability to stage forces in rural areas and launch attacks against civilian and military targets across the North East, according to observers. The groups continued to carry out person-borne improvised explosive device (IED) bombings – many by young women and girls drugged and forced into doing so – targeting the local civilian population, including churches and mosques. In July ISIS-WA abducted six Action Against

Hunger (AAH) aid workers from a convoy heading to deliver food in Borno State. In July 65 people returning from a funeral in a predominantly Muslim community in Borno State were killed by Boko Haram. In September ISIS-WA released a video depicting the beheading of two Christian aid workers; in the video one of the killers vowed to kill every Christian the group captured in “revenge” for Muslims killed in past conflicts. In October ISIS-WA filmed and publicly released its killing of one of the six abducted AAH aid workers, who was Muslim. On December 24, Boko Haram killed seven people and abducted a teenage girl in a raid on a Christian village in Borno State. On December 26, ISIS-WA released a video of the execution of 10 Christians and one Muslim to avenge the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Conflicts between predominantly Muslim Fulani herdsmen and predominantly Christian farmers in the North Central states continued throughout the year, although the violence was lower than during the 2017-2018 spike, reportedly due to government intervention and efforts of civil society to resolve conflicts. Religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) expressed concern that this conflict took on increasingly religious undertones. In addition to religious differences, local authorities, scholars, and regional experts pointed to ethnicity, politics, lack of accountability and access to justice, and increasing competition over dwindling land resources among the key drivers of the violence. Attacks and killings by Fulani herdsman continued during the year, although according to the publicly available Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), the number of civilian victims fell dramatically, from over 1,500 in 2018 to approximately 350 in 2019. According to international media, in February 131 Fulani and 11 Adara were killed in Kaduna State. On April 14, Muslim Fulani herdsmen killed 17 Christians who had gathered after a baby dedication at a Baptist church in the central part of the country, including the mother of the child, sources said. Some domestic and international Christian groups stated that Fulani were targeting Christians on account of their religion. Local and international NGOs and religious organizations criticized the government’s perceived inability to prevent or mitigate violence between Christian and Muslim communities.

U.S. embassy, consulate general, and visiting U.S. government officials regularly promoted principles of religious freedom and religious coexistence in discussions throughout the year with government officials, religious leaders, and civil society organizations. The Ambassador, Consul General, and other senior U.S. officials hosted interfaith dinners, participated in interfaith conferences, and conducted press interviews to promote interfaith dialogue. The embassy sponsored training sessions for journalists who report on ethnoreligious conflicts to help reduce bias

in their reporting and prevent tensions from becoming further inflamed. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator visited Abuja, Bwari Local Government Area, and Lagos to highlight U.S. government support for interfaith cooperation and conflict mitigation efforts.

On December 18, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Nigeria on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 208.7 million (midyear 2019 estimate). While there are no official indicators of religious affiliation in the country, most analysts say it is roughly evenly divided between Muslims and Christians, while approximately 2 percent belong to other or no religious groups. Many individuals syncretize indigenous animism with Islam or Christianity.

A 2010 Pew report found 38 percent of the Muslim population self-identifies as Sunni, the vast majority of whom belong to the Maliki school of jurisprudence, though a sizable minority follows Shafi'i fiqh. The same study found 12 percent of Muslims in the country self-identify as Shia, with the remainder declining to answer or identifying as "something else" (5 percent) or "just a Muslim" (42 percent). Included among the Sunnis are several Sufi brotherhoods, including Tijaniyah, Qadiriyyah, and Mouride. There are also Izala (Salafist) minorities and small numbers of Ahmadi and Kalo Kato (Quraniyoon) Muslims. A 2011 Pew report found among Christians, roughly one quarter are Roman Catholic and three quarters Protestant, with small numbers of Orthodox or other Christian denominations. Among Protestant groups, the Anglican, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches maintain the largest populations, while evangelicals, Pentecostals, Anabaptists (EYN Church of the Brethren), Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, New Apostolics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah's Witnesses report tens of thousands of adherents each. Other communities include Baha'is, Jews (including significant numbers of Judaic-oriented groups), Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, animists, and individuals who do not follow any religion.

The Hausa, Fulani, and Kanuri ethnic groups are most prevalent in the predominantly Muslim North West and North East states. Significant numbers of Christians, including some Hausa, Fulani, and Kanuri, also reside in the North East and North West. Christians and Muslims reside in approximately equal numbers in the North Central and South West states, including Lagos, where the Yoruba ethnic

group – whose members include both Muslims and Christians – predominates. In the South East and South states, where the Igbo ethnic group is dominant, Christian groups, including Catholics, Anglicans, and Methodists, constitute the majority. In the Niger Delta region, where ethnic groups include Ijaw, Igbo, Ogoni, Efik, Ibibio, and Uhrobo among others, Christians form a substantial majority; a small but growing minority of the population is Muslim. Evangelical Christian denominations are growing rapidly in the North Central and South East, South, and South West regions. Ahmadi Muslims maintain a small presence in several cities, including Lagos and Abuja. The Shia Muslim presence is heavily concentrated in the North West states of Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Zamfara, and Kano.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates neither the federal nor the state governments shall establish a state religion and prohibits discrimination on religious grounds. It provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to change one's religion and to manifest and propagate religion "in worship, teaching, practice, and observance," provided these rights are consistent with the interests of defense, public safety, order, morality, or health, and protecting the rights of others. The constitution also states it shall be the duty of the state to encourage interfaith marriages and to promote the formation of associations that cut across religious lines and promote "national integration." It prohibits political parties that limit membership based on religion or have names that have a religious connotation. The constitution highlights religious tolerance, among other virtues, as a distinct "national ethic."

The constitution provides for states to establish courts based on sharia or customary (traditional) law, in addition to common law courts. Sharia courts function in 12 northern states and the Federal Capital Territory. Customary courts function in most of the 36 states. The nature of a case and the consent of the parties usually determine what type of court has jurisdiction. The constitution specifically recognizes sharia courts for "civil proceedings"; such courts do not have the authority to compel participation, whether by non-Muslims or Muslims. At least one state, Zamfara, requires sharia courts to hear civil cases in which all litigants are Muslim and provides the option to appeal any decision to the common law court. Non-Muslims have the option to have their cases tried in the sharia courts if they wish.

The constitution is silent on the use of sharia courts for criminal cases. In addition to civil matters, sharia courts also hear criminal cases if both complainant and defendant are Muslim and agree to the venue. Sharia courts may pass sentences based on the sharia penal code, including for *hudud* (serious criminal offenses for which the Quran and Islamic law provide punishments such as caning, amputation, and stoning). Defendants have the right to challenge the constitutionality of sharia criminal statutes through common law appellate courts. The highest appellate court for sharia-based decisions is the Supreme Court, staffed by common law judges who, while not required to have any formal training in the sharia penal code, may seek advice from sharia experts.

Kano and Zamfara's state-sanctioned Hisbah Boards regulate Islamic religious affairs and preaching, license imams, and attempt to resolve religious disputes between Muslims in those states. The states of Bauchi, Borno, Katsina, and Yobe maintain state-level Christian and Muslim religious affairs ministries or bureaus with varying mandates and authorities, while many other state governors appoint interfaith special advisers on religious affairs.

To build places of worship, open bank accounts, receive tax exemptions, or sign contracts, religious groups must register with the Corporate Affairs Commission as an incorporated trustee, which involves submitting an application form, proof of public notice, a copy of the organization's constitution, a list of trustees, and a fee of 20,000 naira (\$55).

Both federal and state governments have the authority to regulate mandatory religious instruction in public schools. The constitution prohibits schools from requiring students to receive religious instruction or to participate in or attend any religious ceremony or observance pertaining to any religion other than their own. State officials and many religious leaders have stated students have the right to request a teacher of their own religious beliefs to provide an alternative to any instruction offered in a religion other than their own. The constitution also says no religious community will be prevented from providing religious instruction to students of that community in any place that community wholly maintains.

Several states have laws requiring licenses for preachers, places of worship, and religious schools for registered religious groups. In Katsina State, the law establishes a board with the authority to regulate Islamic schools, preachers, and mosques, including issuing permits, suspending operations, and imprisoning or fining violators. The Katsina law stipulates a punishment of one to five years in prison and/or a fine of up to 500,000 naira (\$1,400) for operating without a license.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Throughout the year, Shia Muslims, under the auspices of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), conducted a series of demonstrations, some of which resulted in violent confrontations between protesters and security forces. IMN was the largest Shia organization in the country and was led by Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky who, according to his writings and online communications, draws inspiration from the Iranian revolution and from the late Ayatollah Khomeini. Between March and July, members of the IMN conducted daily protests in Abuja to contest the continued detention of El-Zakzaky, despite a December 2016 Abuja High Court ruling that he be released by January 2017. The protests continued until his temporary release due to illness in August. During an initially peaceful IMN demonstration in Abuja on July 9, an IMN member sparked an exchange of gunfire between police and IMN protestors when he grabbed an officer's holstered pistol, resulting in the deaths of the officer, 15 IMN members, and a security guard, according to press reports. IMN members also broke through police barricades at the National Assembly and police dispersed the crowd with tear gas. Following the July 9 events, the Senate called for the arrest of IMN members involved in the violence, while the House of Representatives called on the government to urgently engage the IMN to resolve the conflict and expressed fears the Shia group was fast evolving "the way Boko Haram started."

Human Rights Watch reported that on July 22, police opened fire on peaceful IMN protesters and killed 11 protesters, a journalist, and a police officer, while dozens of others were wounded or arrested, according to witnesses and authorities. On November 27, police arraigned 60 IMN members arrested at the July 22 protest on charges of culpable homicide, destruction of public property, and public disturbance.

On July 26, the Federal High Court ruled IMN's activities amounted to "acts of terrorism and illegality" and ordered the government to proscribe the "existence and activities" of the group. On July 28, the government complied, officially banning the IMN as an illegal organization and thereby prohibiting its meeting or activities. In its announcement, the government emphasized its proscription of the IMN "has nothing to do with banning the larger numbers of peaceful and law-abiding Shiites in the country from practicing their religion." Following the ban, then-Archbishop of Abuja Cardinal Oneiyekan defended the country's Shia

Muslims and criticized the government's action banning the IMN as a threat to religious freedom for all believers, according to Catholic media. On September 10, despite the government prohibition, the IMN sponsored Ashura religious processions in Bauchi, Kaduna, Gombe, Katsina, and Sokoto States. The IMN reported as many as 12 participants in the processions died in clashes with security forces, with media sources reporting between three and nine killed.

In August the government granted El-Zakzaky temporary release to seek medical treatment in India; he traveled but reportedly refused treatment in India after stating armed Indian guards had been posted in his room during his medical treatment. Upon his return home the government returned him to custody, where he remained through the end of the year.

On November 27, police broke up an IMN protest and arrested 12 members and two journalists. The journalists later were released.

Local and international NGOs continued to criticize the lack of accountability for soldiers implicated in a December 2015 clash between the army and IMN members that, according to a Kaduna State government report, left at least 348 IMN members and one soldier dead, with IMN members buried in a mass grave. Approximately 100 IMN members arrested after that clash remained in detention.

In June the Kaduna state legislature approved a bill to regulate religious preaching. While the government said the new law would protect against "hate speech," religious leaders said it infringed on freedom of speech and the rights of Christians and Muslims. The law required all preachers to be licensed by a state-level body composed of religious leaders, government officials, and security agencies. Later in June Kaduna's highest court nullified the law, stating that it was inconsistent with the constitution's guarantees for freedom of expression, association, and religion. The state government announced it would appeal the decision at the federal level.

In May the Kano state Hisbah Board arrested 80 Muslims accused of eating in public rather than fasting during Ramadan. The Kano hisbah spokesman said they were all eventually released since it was their first offense but noted they would be taken to court if detained again. In October the Kano state hisbah arrested four men for organizing a false online wedding to a young woman over Facebook, stating it "mocked Islam" as well as demeaned the "sanctity of the institution of marriage."

Members of both Christian and Muslim groups continued to report some state and local government laws discriminated against them, including by limiting their rights to freedom of expression and assembly and in obtaining government employment.

Local and international NGOs and religious organizations criticized the government's perceived inability to prevent or effectively mitigate violence between Christian and Muslim communities in the Middle Belt region.

In June some ethnoreligious organizations in the South West and South East reacted with threats of violence to news of a government plan to resettle predominantly Muslim Fulani herdsmen in southern parts of the country. In the South West, both Muslim and Christian groups threatened violence against members of the Fulani ethnic group. The government later abandoned the plan.

In June President Muhammadu Buhari announced plans for the eventual ban of Almajiri Quranic schools due to their reported practice of forcing students to beg in the streets and their perceived association with urban crime and violence; he said the government first would consult with states, which have jurisdiction over the schools, and others in the education community. In July the Kaduna State Commissioner for Education announced that Quranic schools would be integrated into the formal education system. In October the Kano state government announced a "free and compulsory education initiative" that would abolish the payment of school fees and integrate all Almajiri pupils into the formal education system in 2020.

In October police raided four Islamic schools in Kaduna and Katsina States and freed over 1,000 men and boys living in "inhumane and degrading" conditions, including being chained and physically abused, according to international media. In November police freed 259 men, women, and children from an Islamic school in Oyo State and rescued 15 people chained in a church in Lagos. In November Human Rights Watch reported its investigators found individuals chained in 27 of 28 institutions they visited, which included psychiatric hospitals, general hospitals, traditional healing centers, Christian churches, and both Islamic and state-owned rehabilitation centers. Following the raids, President Buhari issued a statement saying, "No responsible democratic government would tolerate the existence of the torture chambers and physical abuses of inmates in the name of rehabilitation of the victims."

In January Sultan of Sokoto Sa'ad Abubakar III and then-Archbishop of Abuja Onaiyekan organized a conference with religious leaders from throughout the country to promote peaceful elections.

In September the Kaduna State Urban Planning Development Agency served the 110-year-old St. George Anglican Church a notice to vacate its premises within seven days on the grounds that the church did not have a certificate of occupancy. A week later the Kaduna state government issued a statement saying the church would remain because of its historical value.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Although the U.S.-designated terrorist organization Boko Haram split into two factions in 2016, one called ISIS-WA and another, headed by Abubakar Shekau, that retained the traditional name of Boko Haram, most residents and government officials continued to refer to both groups collectively as Boko Haram.

Boko Haram and ISIS-WA attacked population centers and religious targets in Borno state. The two insurgencies maintained a growing ability to stage forces in rural areas and launch attacks against civilian and military targets across the North East, according to observers. In July ISIS-WA abducted six Action Against Hunger (AAH) aid workers when a convoy led by the agency was heading to a remote town in Borno State to deliver food. In July 65 persons returning from a funeral in a predominantly Muslim community were killed by Boko Haram. In September ISIS-WA released a video depicting the beheading of two Christian aid workers, Lawrence Duna Dacighir and Godfrey Ali Shikagham, according to media reports; in the video one of the killers vowed to kill every Christian the group captured in revenge for Muslims killed in past religious conflicts. In October ISIS-WA filmed and publicly released the video of the killing of one of the six abducted AAH aid workers, who was Muslim. On December 24, Boko Haram killed seven people and abducted one teenage girl in a raid on a Christian village in Borno State. On December 26, ISIS-WA released a video of the execution of 10 Christian and one Muslim to avenge the death of ISIS leader al-Baghdadi.

Boko Haram continued to carry out person-borne IED bombings – many by young women and girls drugged and forced into doing so – targeting the local civilian population, including churches and mosques. In February and March Boko Haram carried out four attacks on EYN Church of the Brethren villages in southern Borno State, killing one, abducting three children and burning over 30 homes and several

church buildings, according to international media. On February 16, Boko Haram killed 11 people during a suicide attack inside a mosque in Gwozari/Kushari area of Maiduguri.

According to 2018 estimates from the NGO Nigeria Watch, which did not appear to differentiate between Boko Haram and ISIS-WA, 2,135 persons, including Boko Haram members, died due to insurgent violence during that year, compared with 2,829 killed in 2017. More than 22,000 persons, most of them children, remained missing as a result of the Boko Haram insurgency, according an International Committee of the Red Cross statement in September.

On the fifth anniversary of the Boko Haram kidnapping of 276 pupils from the Chibok Government Girls Secondary School on April 14, 2014, 112 remained in captivity, according to government and media reports. Leah Sharibu remained in ISIS-WA captivity since February 2018, reportedly because she refused to convert to Islam from Christianity. According to the Council on Foreign Relations Nigeria Security Tracker, Boko Haram has destroyed 59 churches and 22 mosques since 2010.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Numerous fatal clashes continued throughout the year in the North Central region between predominantly Christian farmers from various ethnic groups and predominantly Fulani Muslim herders. Scholars and other experts, including international NGOs, cited ethnicity, politics, religion, lack of accountability and access to justice, increasing competition over dwindling land resources, population growth, soil degradation, and internal displacement from crime and other forms of violence all as drivers contributing to the violence. Several international and domestic experts noted that armed conflicts in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin had altered grazing routes and brought herder groups in contact with new communities, sometimes leading to conflict because they are unaware of preexisting agreements between the local herding and farming groups. Similarly, internal transhumance (movement of livestock) to the North Central and Southern parts of the country has increased in recent years due to demographic and ecological pressures, according to the UN.

Multiple Christian NGOs stated that religious identity was a primary driver of the conflict. A *Le Monde* op-ed in December, however, stated “reducing the violence in the center of the country to sectarian confrontation is an extreme simplification,” and other analysts noted that the same conflict dynamics exist across the region

where both herders and farmers are Muslim, including the North West, but had received less media attention.

According to a report released by the U.K.-based Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART), “Fulani militia” killed over 1,000 Christians throughout the year. The report noted that the “underlying drivers of the conflict are complex,” and stated that violence targeting predominantly Christian communities, the targeting of church leaders, and the destruction of hundreds of churches suggested religion and ideology were key factors. It also stated that retaliatory violence by Christians occurred, though “we have seen no evidence of comparability of scale or equivalence of atrocities.” According to various secular and Christian media outlets, from February to mid-March, Fulani herders and Boko Haram terrorists killed 280 individuals in predominantly Christian communities. ACLED data, however, documented 350 total civilian deaths by “Fulani militia” in 2019.

A study by the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel noted that within the country, “there are many different Fulani clans, sub-clans, local Fulani cultures and dialects, and variations in herding practices.” Experts stated there was no evidence to suggest the Fulani had an explicit Jihadist agenda or were mobilized behind a common ethnic agenda, and noted there are between 30-40 million Fulani in Africa.

On February 10, on the eve of general elections, as many as 131 members of the predominantly Muslim Fulani ethnic group and 11 members of the predominantly Christian Adara ethnic group were reportedly killed and some 10,000 were internally displaced in clashes in Kajuru. In response, the Kaduna governor arrested the Adara leaders and elder statesmen, a move which local Christian leaders condemned. The governor also announced there were 131 casualties of the attacks and said, “The more the police dig into this matter, the more it is clear that there was a deliberate plan to wipe out certain communities.” Christian leaders disputed the casualty figures announced by the governor, while Fulani leaders later released a list of what they said were the names of the 131 Fulani killed. A Fulani herder told *The Los Angeles Times*, “There is no effort to protect our villagers,” and added that “bandits” were responsible for a deadly attack on [farmers in] Ungwan Barde, not herders; “We don’t know why [the farmers] blamed us.”

On March 14, the NGO Christian Solidarity Worldwide reported that Fulani militia members had killed 120 persons since February 9 in the Adara chiefdom of South Kaduna. According to the Adara Development Association, on March 11, Fulani militia killed 52 persons in attacks on Inkirimi and Dogonnoma villages in Maro,

Kajuru Local Government Area, while the Kaduna Police Command reported 16 deaths.

According to local and international media, in May the discovery of two dead boys at the border between a Christian village and a Hausa Muslim community in Plateau state sparked ethnic-based riots against Hausas, resulting in from five to as many as 30 deaths. In August and September, local media reported armed, ethnic Igbo Christian criminal gang members posing as Fulani Muslim herdsmen killed two priests in the South East in an attempt to incite religious conflict. According to international media, on April 14, Muslim Fulani herdsmen killed 17 Christians who had gathered after a baby dedication at a Baptist church in the central part of the country, including the mother of the child, sources said. Pastor Samson Gamu Yare, community leader of the Mada ethnic group in Nasarawa State, called on the federal government to take measures towards curtailing these attacks on his people.

During the year, media and religious groups reported several cases of priests and other Christian clergy and their families who were attacked, killed, or kidnapped for ransom, often by attackers identified as of allegedly Fulani ethnicity. These cases included, among others, the killing of Father Paul Offu and Father Clement Ugwu and the beating of an evangelical Christian pastor from Kaduna State and kidnapping for ransom of his wife, who died in her captors' custody. Authorities stated these incidents were criminal acts and not religiously motivated, reportedly due to the ethnicities of those arrested for the crimes, although many Christian civil society groups pointed to such incidents as examples of religiously motivated persecution. In August 200 Catholic priests marched through the streets of Enegu city, protesting insecurity and what they characterized as "Fulani attacks on Christians." Muslim religious figures were also the victims of kidnapping. In March Islamic scholar Sheikh Ahmad Sulaiman was kidnapped in Katsina State and released after 15 days.

According to international media, in October in Chikun, Kaduna State, Fulani gunmen kidnapped six school girls and two teachers from Engravers College Kakau, a high school with a Christian perspective that has a secular curriculum and enrolls both Christian and non-Christians. Shunom Giwa, vice principal of Engravers' College, told Morning Star News that security issues led to some parents withdrawing their children from the school. Media reported the abductors stormed the boarding school when most of the students and teachers were asleep. The individuals were released after authorities paid a ransom.

In its report, “Nigeria: The Genocide is Loading,” NGO Jubilee Campaign stated that it had documented at least 52 Fulani militant attacks between January and June 12. HART, in its report, stated the situation between Fulani herdsman and farmers amounted to genocide and governments worldwide should recognize and respond to it as such. Other longtime observers, however, including those with the Africa section of the French National Center for Scientific Research, expressed concern that describing the situation as one of “pre-genocide” was inaccurate, and ran the risks of “misrepresenting the facts, discrediting the media, and making the situation on the ground worse.” In a *Le Monde* op-ed on conflict in Nigeria, scholars stated that the term “genocide” allows some Nigerian politicians to “vindicate one group and instrumentalize another.” Other international observers warned against framing the issue as an attack on one group, since such a claim ignored the complexity of the issue and could deepen and perpetuate the conflict.

In July local communities reacted to news of a government plan to resettle the predominantly Muslim Fulani herdsman in southern parts of the country by threatening violence against Fulani communities in South West and South East states; the plan was later annulled.

In November student protests took place after the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in predominantly Christian Enugu State, announced it would host a conference on witchcraft and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria called for Christians to pray against the event. The event took place as scheduled after the university removed the term “witchcraft” from the title of the conference.

On February 23, interfaith leaders and members of the Strength and Diversity Development Center held a “Weekend of Prayer and March for Peace” in seven states across the country.

On January 10, the NGO 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative organized the first of three international religious freedom roundtables. Participants included representatives of several Muslim and Christian communities. The group formed an interfaith steering committee to guide its efforts to promote religious tolerance.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy, consulate general, and visiting U.S. government officials voiced concern over abuses and discrimination against individuals on the basis of religion and religious tension issues in the country in discussions throughout the year with government officials, including the vice president, cabinet secretaries, and National

Assembly members. They also discussed government and government-supported grassroots efforts to reduce violence and promote religious freedom and interreligious tolerance. In August the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development visited Abuja and Lagos, engaging with government and religious leaders as well as NGOs, to highlight U.S. support for interfaith cooperation and to encourage greater efforts to combat ethnoreligious violence. The Administrator met with the vice president, local government officials, and members of the Interfaith Mediation Center, the Islamic Education Trust, the Christian Association of Nigeria, and the Federation of Muslim Women's Association.

Embassy and consulate general officials continued to promote religious tolerance and interfaith relationship-building with a wide range of religious leaders and civil society organizations. The Ambassador and other senior embassy officials hosted interfaith dinners and conducted press interviews to promote interfaith dialogue. They also participated in multiple interfaith conferences and summits throughout the year encouraging religious, traditional, government, and community leaders to continue to engage in dialogue and work towards sustainable peace. They also emphasized these messages in media interviews during multiple trips to states affected by ethnoreligious conflict, including Kaduna, Plateau, Benue, Taraba, and Adamawa.

The embassy sponsored training for journalists who report on ethnoreligious conflicts to increase their professionalism and reduce bias in their reporting on sensitive matters, emphasizing ways to report on intercommunal tensions without further inflaming them. The embassy also funded peacebuilding programs in conflict-prone states such as Kaduna, Plateau, and Nasarawa. The programs trained leaders in farming and herding communities, including traditional, youth, religious, and female leaders, to build mechanisms to resolve tensions before they became violent conflicts.

In March the embassy held an event celebrating the heroism of Imam Abdullahi Abubakar of Barkin Ladi, Plateau, who in 2018 sheltered his Christian neighbors in his home and in the mosque while his village was attacked, confronted the attackers, and refused them entry. The embassy also featured Abubakar on the cover of the April/May edition of its outreach magazine. In July Abubakar received the Department of State's 2019 Religious Freedom Award.

In June and July the consulate general engaged southern socio-cultural groups, religious leaders, and politicians to reduce tensions emerging from reports of

government-sponsored programs to resettle Fulani communities to southern areas of the country. The embassy and consulate general also worked with a wide range of organizations, including religious groups, to promote peaceful, free, and fair elections in 2019.

In September a senior U.S. government official visited a U.S. jointly funded peacebuilding camp for young people in Nasawara State.

On December 18, in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, the Secretary of State placed Nigeria on the Special Watch List for having engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom.