

# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE WORLD **REPORT 2023**

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## AFRICA UPDATE



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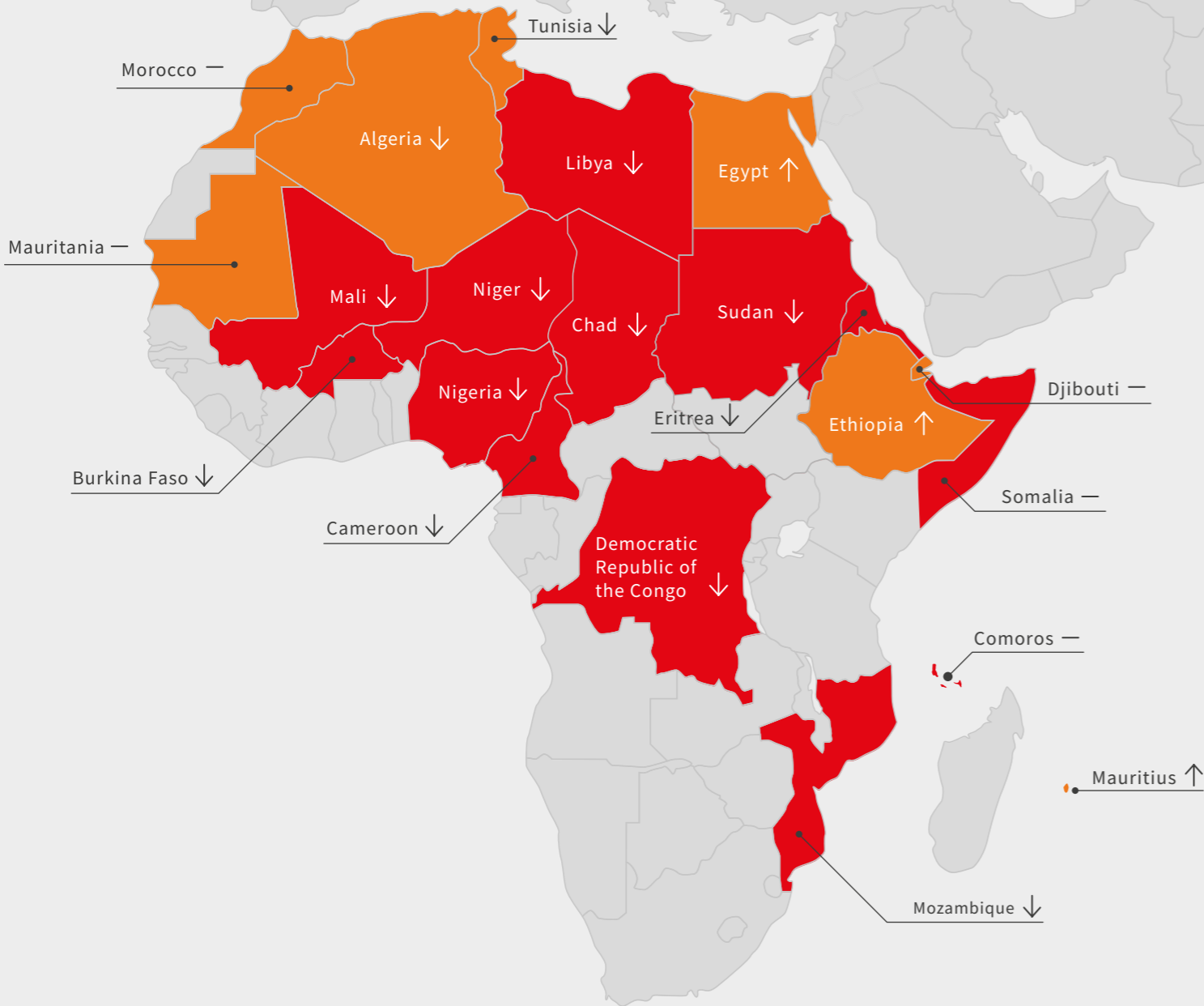


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# Countries in Africa with Significant Violations of Religious Freedom



<span style="color: red;">■</span>	Persecution, hate crimes and religiously motivated violence
<span style="color: orange;">■</span>	Discrimination, hate crimes and religiously motivated violence
↑	Improved since 2021
↓	Worsened since 2021
—	No change since 2021

The map of sub-Saharan Africa on p. 7 also includes countries “under observation”. Denoted by a magnifying glass symbol, these are countries where newly emerging factors of concern have been observed, with the potential to cause a fundamental breakdown in freedom of religion. These include legal measures against aspects of religious freedom, increasing cases of hate crimes and occasional religiously motivated violence.

## Foreword

By Bishop Oliver Dashe Doeme of Maiduguri, Nigeria

Our country, Nigeria, has never experienced what it is experiencing at the moment, namely: untold hardship on our people, hunger and insecurity amongst others. However, we are a people of hope. We know that God has not and will never abandon us. He will support us, and as long as we continue to turn to our blessed mother Mary, victory will surely be won through her prayers for her children.

The recent history of Nigeria is a history of suffering. In 2009, the very year I became the bishop of Maiduguri in north-east Nigeria, Boko Haram began its campaign of terror: targeting churches, kidnapping women – especially Christian women, waging a general campaign of terror and attacking all men of good will, including Muslim imams who spoke out against their evil acts. These affected the diocese in no small measure.

Thus, the diocese set up on-going programmes that will help tend the wounds the terrorists inflicted upon the people, among which is trauma counselling for women who were abducted and shamefully abused by the terrorists. These programmes, which we are grateful to Aid to the Church in Need for supporting, have provided inner healing for most grievous wounds.

To a large extent, north-east Nigeria is now more peaceful than other parts – but we can only say that because the rest of Nigeria is in crisis. We now have bandits attacking communities and taking people away, and militants from the Fulani herder communities targeting Christian communities in the Middle Belt – attacks which our own politicians determined constituted genocide.

ACN’s *Religious Freedom in the World* report draws attention to research that shows that in the space of 12 years, Nigeria has seen 43,000 Christians killed by terrorists, 17,500 churches attacked, 2,000 Christian schools destroyed and all this chaos has led to 4 million IDPs in the Middle Belt. As my brother Bishop Mark Njukwe said just a few months ago: “The land we are standing on is already watered by the blood of the martyrs”.

This notwithstanding, prayer has turned the tide against the terrorists in the north-east,

and since Maiduguri Diocese began her Rosary campaign in 2013, thousands of terrorists have surrendered their weapons and many of the displaced people have returned to their homes. This is why in May 2023, I gathered with my brother bishops and thousands of the faithful to once again re-consecrate Maiduguri Diocese to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. This is because it is only through prayer that we will win the war we are fighting, which is first and foremost a spiritual battle: “For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6: 12).

Please pray that God’s peace will prevail in Nigeria.





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## CASE STUDY

# Nigeria: Stoned to death for a WhatsApp message



On 12<sup>th</sup> May 2022, a 22-year-old Christian, Deborah Samuel Yakubu, was attacked by her classmates, stoned to death, and her body set on fire. A second-year economics student at the Shehu Shagari College of Education in Sokoto, northern Nigeria, Deborah was accused of having sent a blasphemous message complaining via WhatsApp to her class about the forced introduction of the Islamic religion into an academic study group. It was upon her return to school following the holidays that classmates led a group to capture her. Witnesses described that “school security and police attempted to rescue the victim but were overwhelmed by the students.”<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to Islamic legal norms, the brutal act of mob violence was a summary execution. A statement released by Sa’idu Muhammadu Maccido, the Sokoto State Sultanate Council Secretary, denounced the attack, stating: “The Sultanate Council condemns the incident in its totality and has urged the security agencies to bring the perpetrators of the unjustifiable incident to justice... The Sultanate Council has urged all to remain calm and ensure peaceful co-existence among all people of the state and nation.”<sup>2</sup>

After the attack, two individuals were arrested for the murder, whereupon groups of young rioters – encouraged by adults in the background – attacked two Catholic churches; the vandals destroyed windows at the Holy Family Catholic Cathedral and partially burned St Kevin’s Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup>

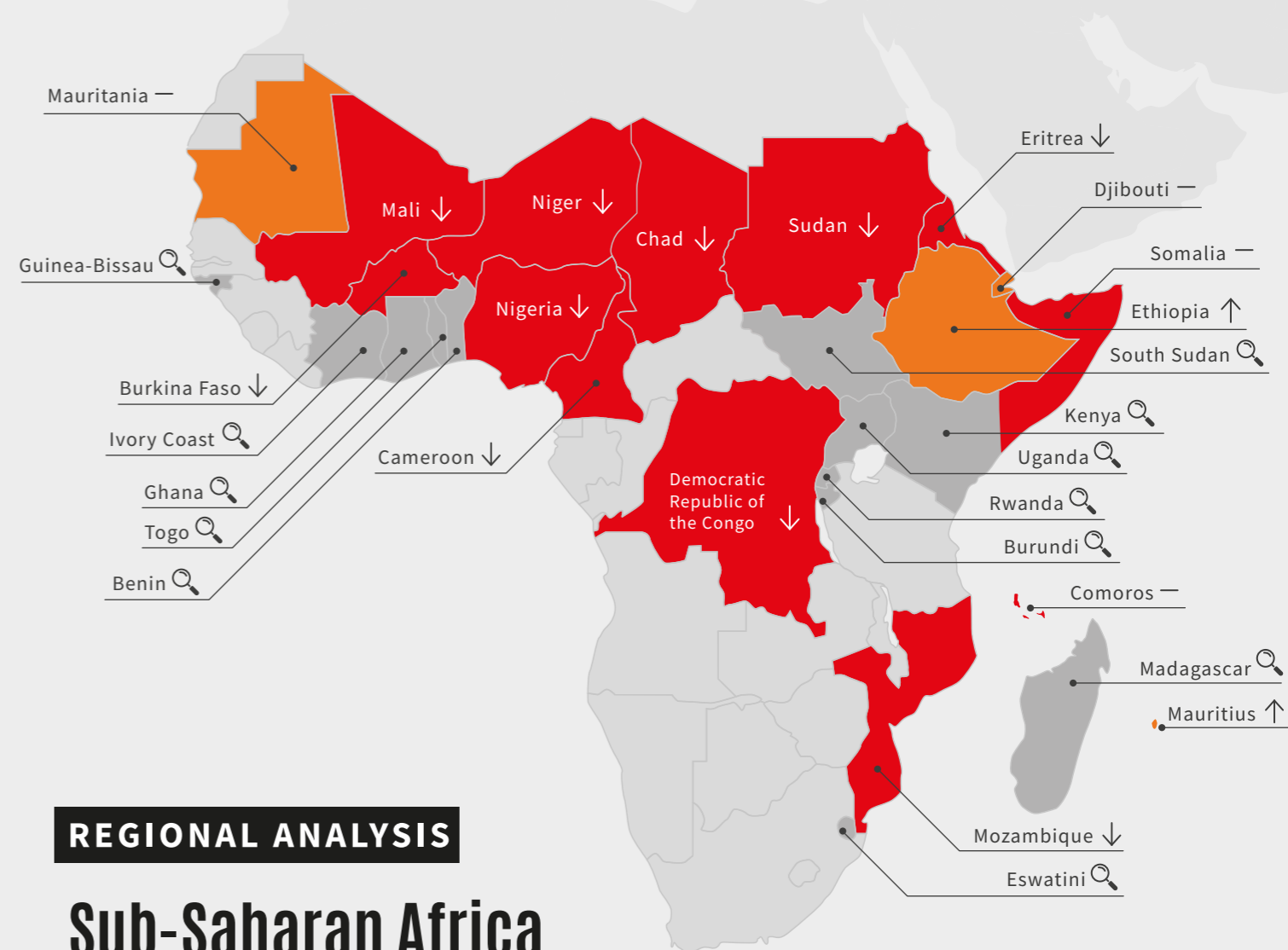
Notwithstanding the Sultanate’s condemnation, the series of attacks reaffirmed the fears among Christians of increasing Muslim radicalisation in the north. Matthew Hassan Kukah, Catholic Bishop of Sokoto Diocese, expressed his sympathy for these fears, stating: “Far from universal condemnation of this horrific act, many Islamist extremists and their Imams applauded the murder, claiming it was justified, and calling for additional violence against any who might ask for legal justice against the perpetrators.”<sup>4</sup> Deborah’s family have since moved to the Christian south of Nigeria.

(Far Left) Deborah Samuel Yakubu, a Christian college student, who was killed by a mob of hard-line Muslim students in Sokoto, Nigeria on 12<sup>th</sup> May 2022. (Left) Her funeral in Tungan Magajiya in Rijau.





Extremists are battling for control of DR Congo's rare metals. See p. 14.



## REGIONAL ANALYSIS

# Sub-Saharan Africa

By Mark von Riedemann

Continental events in Africa during the reporting period have been overshadowed by an explosion of violence inflicted on military and civilian populations in sub-Saharan Africa by local and transnational jihadist groups, which systematically persecute all those who do not accept the extreme Islamist ideology.

And the numbers are alarming. According to a 2023 study by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, violence perpetrated by militant Islamists in the Sahel and Somalia “accounted for 77 percent of the total reported violent events across Africa in 2022”.<sup>5</sup> Of these, civilian deaths rose from “4,307 in 2021 to 7,220 in 2022” a 68 percent increase, a significant marker as “militant groups are not focused on winning hearts and minds so much as intimidating local populations into compliance”.<sup>6</sup>

### **An opportunistic caliphate**

The violence is driven, in many cases, by a toxic alliance between Islamist jihadists, organised criminality, and home-grown bandits: profit-driven mercenaries or local fighters pursuing local interests incited by extremist preachers and armed by transnational terrorist groups. These groups target state authorities, the military, police, and civilians including Muslim, Christian and traditional religious leaders and faithful.

The flourishing of radicalisation and violent extremism in sub-Saharan Africa can be attributed to a number of social factors including: poverty, corruption, governance weakness, illiteracy, youth unemployment, a lack of access to resources, separatist movements, and pre-existing intercommunal violence between herders and farmers over land rights (exacerbated by climate change impact),<sup>7</sup> which all combine to fuel resentment and sustain armed violence. Jihadist movements fill the gap through ideology, economic opportunity (weapons and money) and a promised end to corruption.<sup>8</sup>

Transnational jihadist groups such as Islamic State and Al-Qaeda do not create new divisions but exploit and deepen existing ones. The strategy is less the conquering and defence of a fixed territory, an Islamic “state” as attempted in Iraq and Syria, but rather a mobile, opportunistic caliphate favouring attacks on (preferably) mineral rich rural areas where thinly stretched military forces are less able to defend. Attacks against cities are intended to terrorise but also to pin down military forces in urban areas.

### **The proliferation of Islamist extremism**

Islamist violence is found across Africa, but the main theatres of jihadist activity are concentrated in the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, Somalia, and Mozambique.



The main Islamist groups operating in these regions include: the transnational Al-Qaeda and affiliates i.e. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, (AQIM); the transnational Islamic State and affiliates (ISWAP, ISGS, ISS); Jama'at Nusrat al Islam (JNIM), a coalition of individual Islamist extremist groups and their affiliates; Al-Shabaab (Somalia) and affiliates; and Ahlu Sunnah wa Jama'a (ASWJ), aka Al-Shabaab aka IS-Moz and their affiliates; Boko Haram and affiliates; and finally unaffiliated militant groups.<sup>9</sup>

**Western Sahel**, the borderlands of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, experienced “the most rapid expansion of militant Islamist violence of any theatre” in 2022. It accounted for 7,899 deaths, more than 40 percent of the continental total of fatalities.<sup>10</sup>

**“The Islam of the armed groups is not the Islam of our brothers”**

**Burkina Faso** has become a main theatre for jihadist operations, experiencing a “69-percent increase in militant Islamist-linked fatalities totalling 3,600 deaths” in 2022 alone.<sup>11</sup> Led mainly by groups linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, these have killed thousands of people and displaced over 1.9 million,<sup>12</sup> with jihadist groups controlling more than 40 percent of the country.<sup>13</sup> According to Catholic Bishop Laurent Dabiré, “The country is being attacked by diverse groups that use Islam for propaganda or for mobilisation. The Islam of the armed groups is not the Islam of our brothers. The Muslims of Burkina are themselves targets.”<sup>14</sup>

Endemic violence first visited **Mali** in 2012 when jihadist groups seized control of the north. Here the state is virtually absent, giving free reign for battles between Islamic State and Al-Qaeda-linked extremists (JNIM) as well as with non-jihadist, predominantly Tuareg, rebels.<sup>15</sup> A new front has opened in central Mali, inflicting human rights abuses on civilians caught in a web of violence between the military, mercenary forces including the Russian Wagner group, and jihadists. According to Catholic clergy, armed groups near Mopti banned alcohol and pork, and forced women of all faiths to wear veils. Christian communities near Didja reported *Shari'a* law being imposed, and being compelled to learn the *Qur'an* and Islamic prayers.<sup>16</sup>

The **Lake Chad Basin** at the intersection of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, remains the third most deadly region in Africa, “comprising 20 percent of all militant Islamist-linked fatalities”.<sup>17</sup> Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) continue to carry out attacks against military and civilians, with **Chad** suffering from persistent humanitarian challenges with more than one million people displaced, and food insecurity following failed harvests affecting more than 5.3 million people.<sup>18</sup>

In **Nigeria**, although Boko Haram was weakened with the death of its leader Abubakar Shekau in May 2021, the group continued indiscriminate attacks against military

and civilians, recording a 57 percent increase in violent attacks and a 70 percent jump in fatalities in north-west Nigeria, Chad and south-eastern Niger.<sup>19</sup> Boko Haram's main splinter group, ISWAP, not only attacked security forces and civilians in the north-eastern Borno State, but expanded to include Kano, Kogi, Niger, and Taraba states.<sup>20</sup> Contrary to Boko Haram's kill and loot approach, ISWAP implements a form of governance over territory invaded, encouraging civilian trade, imposing taxation and “settling local disputes through *Shari'a* courts”. The “punishment of cattle rustlers” has, according to the International Crisis Group, “won [ISWAP] a degree of acceptance from locals” and is likely to grow and expand.<sup>21</sup> In the predominantly Muslim north, Christians face systemic discrimination including: exclusion from government positions, abduction and forced marriage of Christian women by Muslim men, no authorisations granted for church or chapel constructions, and the imposition of the Muslim hijab on all female students in all secondary schools.

**“Amongst the various traditions, the Christian community is the most targeted”**

**Cameroon** struggles with sectarian conflict as well as external terrorist threats. Internal challenges are focused on the Anglophone crisis, factional violence between anglophones and francophones in Cameroon's north-west and south-west regions. Furthermore, Cameroon's Far North region has been destabilised by violence from competing armed extremists such as Boko Haram and the splinter group ISWAP. Amongst the various traditions, the Christian community is recognised as the most targeted, with reports of jihadists abducting “numerous civilians, including Christian women and girls who were often sexually abused and forced into marriage with Muslim men”.<sup>22</sup>

**Niger** confronts armed conflict, population displacement and food insecurity along its borders with Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Libya. The nation witnessed a 43 percent increase in violent events in 2022.<sup>23</sup> Hostilities erupted because of ethnic disputes and competition over resources, but also from attacks by jihadist groups linked to Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, and Boko Haram from Nigeria.

In **Somalia**, Al-Shabaab controls large swathes of territory, imposing their own interpretation of Islam and *Shari'a* on both Muslims and non-Muslims. This includes a ban on all forms of media, entertainment, smoking, and any behaviour deemed as un-Islamic, such as shaving beards. The small number of non-Muslim believers are largely Christian converts from Islam. Conversion is seen as a betrayal to family and community; an individual even suspected of conversion is likely to face harassment, intimidation or even murder.<sup>24</sup>

Although Al-Shabaab lost domination over some territory in **Kenya**, the group remains consolidated in the area, launching sporadic attacks. The government's anti-terrorism activities are allegedly disproportionately

targeting Muslims, driven by societal fear and political frustration; the largest contingent of foreign fighters in Al-Shabaab are Muslim Kenyans, with jihadists often targeting state institutions.<sup>25</sup>

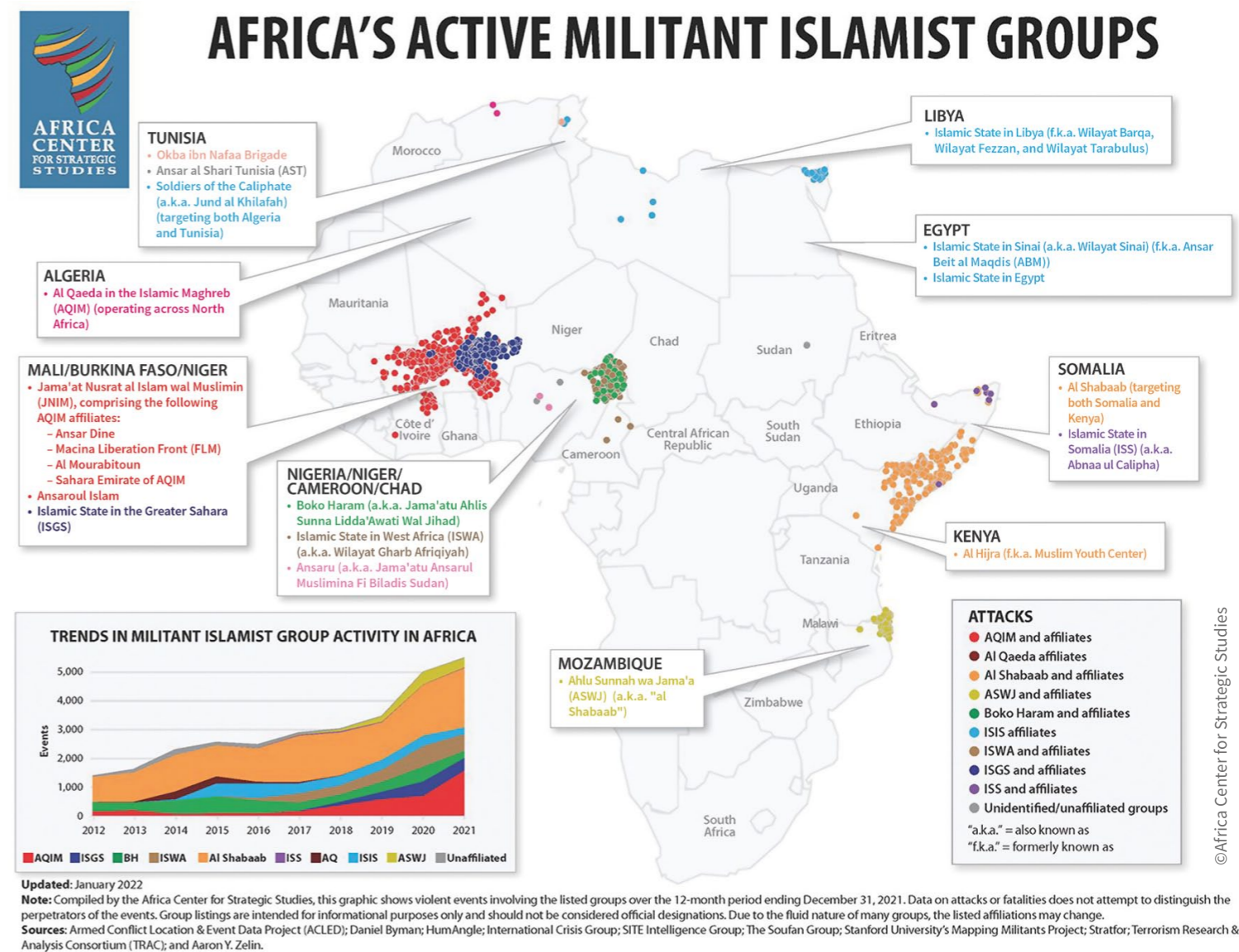
With regards to the southern Africa subregion, insurgency attacks increased in **Mozambique** by an ISIS affiliated jihadist group called Ahlu Sunnah wa Jama'a (ASWJ) – known locally as Al-Shabaab (no relation to Somalia's Al-Qaeda-affiliate, Al-Shabaab) and internationally as IS-Moz. According to a report by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, IS-Moz numbers “at least 1,000 militants” attempting to capture Cabo Delgado province to establish “an Islamist breakaway regime”.<sup>26</sup> Reported

violent incidents in 2022 – killings, abductions, looting, and destroying property – increased by 29 percent. These attacks were notable as violence was mainly directed against civilians (Christians and Muslims), accounting for 66 percent of all violent events, more than any other region on the continent.<sup>27</sup> To date more than one million people are internally displaced.<sup>28</sup>

**Jihadists target religious leaders as coercive tools to spread fear**

In the Great Lakes region, at the borders of Rwanda, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda, competition for mineral resources has resulted in ferocious

A 70 percent annual increase in violent events linked to militant Islamist groups in the Sahel drove extremist violence in Africa to record levels in 2021.





violence and horrific human rights abuses. Estimates indicate up to 122 armed groups are active in **DR Congo** alone<sup>29</sup> where, particularly in the northern and eastern parts of the country, militias such as M23 and jihadists such as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF – an ISIS African branch) terrorise the population and target religious leaders as coercive tools to spread fear. From April to June 2022, the UN recorded nearly 1,000 civilian deaths, with 700,000 displaced in all of 2022.<sup>30</sup> In **Uganda**, several attacks by the same ADF were reported, especially in the east of the country where extremists threaten the Christian population and target churches.

In addition to gold, timber and diamonds, **Central African Republic** (CAR) is home to so-called rare-earth minerals essential for the digital economy.<sup>31</sup> On 30<sup>th</sup> June 2022, the CAR Catholic Bishops Conference denounced all actors involved in the violence, including guerrilla groups, Russian mercenaries, Rwandan soldiers, and the Central African Armed Forces.<sup>32</sup> The bishops condemned the horrors inflicted, including “human and material destruction, abuse, rape and violation of human rights, destruction of property [and] places of worship, and exploitation of religious beliefs.”<sup>33</sup>

The most significant development in **Ethiopia** in the period under review was the start of the civil war in the country’s northern Tigray region. While not religiously motivated, reports indicated that Eritrean and Ethiopian troops attacked both churches and mosques. Violence against religious communities included an attack on Muslims during the funeral of a prominent local sheik in Gondar in April 2022, though perhaps the nadir of the conflict was the massacre of reportedly up to 800 people at the Orthodox Maryam Tsiyon Church in Aksum.<sup>34</sup> As for **Eritrea**, the regime ruled by the unelected president, Isaias Afwerki, emphasises “martyrdom for the nation” and decrees that citizens live accordingly.<sup>35</sup> It is a dictatorship in which most human rights, including religious freedom, are non-existent.

#### Working towards peace

Notwithstanding the tensions and violence, it is also important to state the constructive interreligious efforts. Of note were the visits of Pope Francis to DR Congo and South Sudan in January and February 2023, in which he called upon leadership in both countries to work towards peace.

Among the myriad of national efforts, in **Cameroon**, government officials joined 60 Muslim and Christian clerics and hundreds of Muslims and Christians in the capital, Yaoundé, to pray for peace during the Africa Football Cup of Nations.<sup>36</sup>

In the **Ivory Coast**, Christian and Muslim religious leaders gathered in Abidjan for an international symposium under the title “The Eternal Message of Religions” in

which a common declaration was agreed that “solidarity, fraternity and dialogue among all religions must be the very basis of social peace”.<sup>37</sup>

In **Central African Republic**, an interfaith group called the Platform of Religious Confessions of Central Africa united the religious leaders of the country’s Muslim, Evangelical, and Catholic communities. Together the leaders courageously travelled to the front lines to reopen dialogue between armed groups and elected officials.<sup>38</sup>

#### Long-term risks

According to the UN’s World Food Programme, displacement across the Sahel (the nations of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) over the past three years has “increased by almost 400 percent”.<sup>39</sup> In the same region during the same period, the number of people facing starvation “has skyrocketed from 3.6 to 10.5 million”.<sup>40</sup>

If left unchecked, the cycle of violence, displacement, and famine will continue to degrade, provoking further long-term consequences including deeper intercommunal rifts, economic decline, political instability, and the rendering destitute of millions. Although Muslims and Christians are equally victims to extremist violence, with the growing Islamist radicalisation, Christians tend to increasingly become a specific target for the terrorists, eliminating the characteristic religious pluralism – and harmony – of the region.

## CASE STUDY

# Central African Republic: Documentary praises deceased imam’s peacebuilding

(Below) Imam Kobine Layama with Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga shortly after they set up the inter-faith initiative. (Left) Imam Layama preaching peace.

A film released in 2021 paid tribute to the work of the late Imam Kobine Layama who brought Christian and Islamic leaders together to promote peace and mediate between the two religious communities.

The imam set up the initiative in 2013 when rebels from the Muslim-majority militant group Séléka were seizing territory for political and financial gain, singling out non-Muslim areas to attack. This caused Christian, Animists and others to band together as Anti-Balaka groups – these were originally defence units formed to protect against Séléka raids, but quickly became a militia force in their own right, targeting Muslim areas for their own enrichment.

Imam Layama, the Chairman of the Islamic community in the Central Africa Republic, started his work with Catholic Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga and Rev’d Nicolas Guerekoyame, the president of the Evangelical Alliance, to promote interreligious harmony in parts of the east where critical tensions were building between Muslim and Christian communities because of Séléka and Anti-Balaka activities. Imam Layama said: “We all saw the danger – everything was in place for a war between Christians and Muslims.”

Séléka threatened Imam Layama for saying that its activities are not compatible with the *Qur’an*, but he continued his work undeterred until his death of a heart attack in November 2020.

In September 2021 the movie *Siriri* was released, a documentary focusing on Imam Layama’s tireless fight for peace alongside his Christian counterparts. It was filmed during the last years of his life by Franco-Swiss director Manuel von Stürler.





## BACKGROUND

# Nigeria: A Failing Democracy?

By Maria Lozano

Nigeria is one of the largest democracies in the world. With over 200 million inhabitants, it is the continent's biggest country in demographic as well as economic terms and plays a key role in the geopolitics of sub-Saharan Africa. The African giant has been a multi-party democracy since 1999, but the past decades have seen its security problems grow bigger and more complex. In 2022, Nigeria ranked sixth in the Global Terrorism Index<sup>41</sup> behind Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Burkina Faso, and Syria, and placed 143<sup>rd</sup> out of a total of 163 countries in the Global Peace Index.<sup>42</sup>

Almost every single problem that affects other African countries can also be found in Nigeria. The unification under British rule of territories with their own distinct ethnic, political, and religious realities created a dichotomy between the north and the south, divided by a Middle Belt that has borne the brunt of many of the current violent conflicts.

Christianity is the majority religion (46.2 percent) based principally in the south whereas Islam (45.8 percent) is found mainly in the north, though this does not mean that there are no Christians in the north and vice-versa. The north-eastern state of Borno, for example, the birthplace of Boko Haram, is 30 percent Christian. Although the number of Christians and Muslims is almost identical in the country, many websites insist that Islam is the majority religion. Reinforcing this false impression is Nigeria's participation (since 1986) in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, an alliance formed by 57 countries in which Muslims are the majority.<sup>43</sup>

Politically and administratively the Muslim north is more important, but it is home to only 40 percent of the population. In principle, in a multi-religious, multi-ethnic nation, this would give the Christian south equal or greater weight, however, almost 95 percent of the political and military power at the federal level is held by Muslims. The resulting tensions hindering the country's democratic development are further exacerbated by the implementation of *Shari'a* law in 12 of Nigeria's 36 northern states. With the recently elected Muslim-Muslim ticket under President Tinubu, there is scepticism that anything will change under the new national government.

Although Christians, with a population of almost 100 million – almost 50 percent of the population – are not a minority, those in the northern states complain of systemic and deeply entrenched religious discrimination. Their situation is reminiscent of minority Christian populations in Pakistan, Sudan, Iraq, and Arab countries. The most significant concerns for Christians regarding the lack of religious freedom – and democratic principles – in northern Nigeria (particularly where *Shari'a* is applied) include: that the constitution recognises the (*Shari'a*) Penal Code in the north whereas the Criminal Code is applied in the south; that Christian girls and women suffer abduction, rape and forced marriages with little or no legal recourse; that while Muslim men may marry Christian women, Christian men may not marry Muslim women; that traditional Muslim moral standards – *Hisbah* – are often imposed by force, including on non-Muslims (e.g. segregation by sex on public transport and enforcing dress codes in educational institutions); that Christians suffer political exclusion as well as a lack of equity in recruitment for the armed forces (police, military etc.); that Christian Churches are neither allowed to buy land nor given space to build chapels or places of worship in tertiary institutions; that while Christian religious education is not allowed in public schools, Islamic teachers are employed in all public schools; that Christians have fewer job opportunities, a lack of promotion opportunities in public positions, and a lack of access to social welfare; and that many Christian students opt to change their names to gain admission to professional courses.

Religious communities, predominantly Christians, in the north and Middle Belt face the consequences of often indescribable violence – atrocities committed by armed groups (Boko Haram, ISWAP and Fulani militias) driven by a mix of toxic motivations including territorial gain, criminality, ethnicity and Islamist jihadism bordering, in certain states, on violence with genocidal elements.

The final blow, however, is the silence and passivity of the political powers, which neither condemn nor persecute the systematic attacks, particularly by the Fulani militias, that have led to the massive internal displacement of Christians, leaving entire regions depopulated.

A recent report from the Makurdi Diocese in Benue State denounced the fact that in one diocese in one year (2022) alone, Fulani herders attacked 93 villages and killed 325 farmers.<sup>44</sup> At present, of the almost 6 million inhabitants, 2 million are internally displaced, most of them Christian farmers.

Nigeria is not alone suffering the jihadist violence, with Niger, Chad, Mali, and Burkina Faso badly shaken by Islamic extremism. Nigeria, however, is unique and of crucial importance for the development of the African continent. As indicated, Nigeria is an economic and demographic powerhouse with the population expected to double to 400 million in two decades. The events, and governance, in the coming years will not only have an enormous influence in the country but throughout the region. If the Nigerian authorities do not address the conflicts concerning land, ethnicity, criminality, and religious extremism, as well as the breakdown in democratic values and the equal rights of its citizens including religious freedom, the cancer of Islamist jihadism and political disintegration evident in the northern half of Africa will spread. The socio-political pressure and unabated atrocities will provoke an exodus of young Christians seeing neither hope nor future in the land of their forefathers.

A protester holding the Nigerian flag walks the streets during demonstrations in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, in October 2020.



@Emmanuel Ikwuegbu-Unsplash



## CASE STUDY

# DR Congo: Smartphones, rare-earth metals and jihadist violence



About 70 percent of the world's cobalt, an essential metal necessary to produce lithium-ion rechargeable batteries for electric cars and computers, is mined in eastern DR Congo.<sup>45</sup> More than a quarter of the world's tantalum (extracted from coltan ore) used in smartphones is mined in eastern DR Congo.<sup>46</sup> The greatest concentrations of the country's extremist and jihadist militias, and violent attacks, are in eastern DR Congo.

The situation is complex, a transnational war economy involving political, economic, ethnic, and religious interests with terrorism reaching levels constituting crimes against humanity. Over the past 10 years, the battle to control the coltan mines has taken the lives of over 4 million Congolese.<sup>47</sup>

The number of terrorist groups has grown from a few dozen in 2006 to approximately 120 today.<sup>48</sup> Rebel factions such as M23 and jihadists such as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF – claimed by Islamic State as Islamic State Central Africa Province) commit atrocities against the population with impunity. From April to June 2022 alone, the UN recorded nearly 1,000 civilian deaths; in all of 2022 over 700,000 civilians were displaced.<sup>49</sup> Increasingly, extremists are targeting religious leaders and places of worship.

The Catholic Church has been an outspoken critic and advocate for the victims. In April 2021, the bishops highlighted the goals of the terrorists, stating they are “exploiting the weaknesses of the regular armed forces in order to achieve their political and religious goals”, which include “the occupation of the land, illegal exploitation of natural resources, gratuitous self-enrichment and the Islamisation of the region without regard for religious freedom”.<sup>50</sup>

The world-wide technology-driven need for cobalt is estimated to grow by 60 percent by 2025.<sup>51</sup> The attacks in DR Congo, including jihadist violence, are not anticipated to abate.

A Congolese mineworker extracting Coltan (Columbite-Tantalite) in a tin mine near the village of Nzibira in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The rare metallic ore is a core element used in the production of mass consumed electronic goods.

## PROFILE

# Leah Sharibu: Prisoner for her Faith

By John Newton



(Right) Women harvesting crops at an IDP camp on the outskirts of Yola.

One of more than 100 schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram/ISWAP in February 2018, Leah Sharibu was the only Christian student and the only captive not to be subsequently released – because she refused to convert to Islam. For Leah, her Faith was more important than her freedom.

On the morning of 19<sup>th</sup> February 2018, Boko Haram/ISWAP attacked the Government Science and Technical College in Dapchi, Yobe State, seizing 110 students.<sup>52</sup> It was reported that security forces received advance warning of the raid, but failed to act.<sup>53</sup>

On Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> March 2018, most students were returned to Dapchi by the extremists, following negotiations with the government.<sup>54</sup> Leah's mother, Rebecca Sharibu, could not find her daughter among the freed schoolgirls. Two of Leah's friends, who were also taken, told her:



Boko Haram told Leah to accept Islam and she refused. So they said she would not come with us and she should go and sit back down with three other girls they had there. We begged her to just recite the Islamic declaration and put the hijab on and get into the vehicle, but she said it was not her faith, so why should she say it was? If they want to kill her, they can go ahead, but she won't say she is a Muslim.<sup>55</sup>

One of the girls described how Leah and two classmates had managed to escape while in captivity: "She didn't tell us she was leaving... We thought she was just going round the corner, but she sneaked out along with [her friends] Maryam and Amira." After walking for three days, the tired and hungry schoolgirls asked a Fulani nomad family for help returning to Dapchi. But instead of helping them escape, the head of the family gave them some milk to drink and returned them to Boko Haram/ISWAP.<sup>56</sup>

In October 2018 a ransom demand – and a threat to kill her if it was not met – was issued, just two months after an audio recording of Leah begging to be set free was released.<sup>57</sup> Unfortunately negotiations between the federal government and the terrorists were ultimately unsuccessful. According to one account, just as the government started setting up arrangements to hand over the money to pay Leah's ransom, Boko Haram/ISWAP pulled out of the negotiations.<sup>58</sup>

The extremists went on to issue a statement: "From today, Sharibu, 15, and Ngaddah are now our slaves. Based on our doctrines, it is now lawful for us to do whatever we want to do with them." "Ngaddah" referred to Alice Ngaddah, another Christian who had been kidnapped by the Islamists. Alice was a nurse who was seized by Boko Haram/ISWAP, along with other colleagues, from an Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp near Rann, Borno State, on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2018. The announcement of their enslavement was made shortly after the extremists executed one of Alice's colleagues from the camp: Hauwa Mohammed Liman, a Muslim midwife. Saifura Hussaini Ahmed Khorsa, another female Muslim Red Cross worker taken from the camp in Borno State had been murdered by Boko Haram/ISWAP the previous month. The jihadists killed them on the grounds that they were "apostates".

With the government's negotiations having stalled and the situation looking dire, Pastor Gideon Para-Mallam approached the man who had been acting as the intermediary with Boko Haram/ISWAP to find out if they would allow private individuals to raise funds

to secure Leah's release. The intermediary got back to Pastor Gideon in November 2018 with the message: "Sorry, BH said the window of negotiation had closed permanently by the end of October".

Following a period of rumour and uncertainty, it was reported in January 2020 that Leah had converted to Islam, married a Boko Haram/ISWAP commander and given birth to a son. This was verified by independent sources.<sup>59</sup> Pastor Gideon managed to piece together what occurred: by the end of 2018 Leah had been made a slave, suffering humiliating and degrading treatment. "The pain of slavery was one of the key reasons that motivated Leah to outwardly convert to Islam in order to 'regain some freedom and human dignity,'" he said.

Boko Haram/ISWAP captives reduced to slavery have experienced ongoing sexual abuse, including rape. Following her conversion, Leah was married to a high-ranking Boko Haram/ISWAP officer, but the union did not last and she was subsequently sold to be a bride to another Boko Haram commander. She gave birth to her first child, a boy, in 2020, followed by a girl in 2021, and has since given birth to a third child. Pastor Gideon added: "Without doubt, to my mind, Leah remains a secret believer in a complicated context."

Leah is still alive, and still in the hands of Boko Haram/ISWAP. An individual who was captive at the time, saw her on 10<sup>th</sup> May 2023. They were able to positively identify her, as they had been with Leah and Alice between 29<sup>th</sup> December 2022 and 14<sup>th</sup> January 2023, when Leah was then pregnant with her third child.

Pastor Gideon Para-Mallam, who is close to Leah's family, told ACN: "This is not time to give up praying and advocating for the release of Leah Sharibu and several other women and girls still in Boko Haram captivity regardless of their religious orientation. They remain in grave danger of psychological and emotional trauma with unpleasant experiences. They have become sex objects with little or no choice. They all desire freedom.

"The international community – to my mind – cannot escape blame when the history of these atrocities is documented and discussed by future generations... The international community hasn't done enough to secure – or get the Nigerian government to act to secure – the release of not just Leah Sharibu but of all the others."

On Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> August 2023 Leah, now 20, had been in captivity for 2,000 days. Pastor Gideon said: "Leah is in captivity today because she refused to deny her Christian faith. Leah traded her freedom for her faith in Christ."

## CASE STUDY

# Burkina Faso: Jihadists wreaking havoc



The number of civilians killed across Burkina Faso increased sharply to more than 3,600 in 2022, as jihadist groups linked to Al-Qaeda and Daesh (ISIS) continued their insurgency against the government. The number of deaths includes the June 2021 massacre in the northern town of Solhan, where at least 160 were killed.

Driven by extremism and religious radicalisation, these groups' activities have affected believers across the religious spectrum, including thousands of mainstream Muslims. As Bishop Laurent Dabiré of Dori told ACN: "**The Islam of the armed groups is not the Islam of our brothers. The Muslims of Burkina are themselves targets.**"<sup>60</sup> Sources in the Burkinabe Muslim Community Organisation, the Catholic Archdiocese of Ouagadougou, and the Federation of Evangelical Churches all reported an increase in religiously motivated attacks.<sup>61</sup>

During the period under review by the *Religious Freedom in the World* report, it was noted that more than 1.9 million people were displaced<sup>62</sup> – that figure may have now exceeded 2 million.<sup>63</sup>

Since Boko Haram attacks on police triggered the current insurgency in August 2015, jihadist groups have taken control of more than 40 percent of the country, and operations continue to increase the area under extremist influence.<sup>64</sup> In February 2022, several Islamist factions redoubled efforts to take Djibo, the capital of Soum Province and a major hub for cattle trading. A large-scale blockade cut off the town from the surrounding region and, as the extremists attacked supply convoys, Djibo has become reliant on security forces airlifting in supplies to prevent starvation.

In areas under extremist occupation a hard-line interpretation of *Shari'a* law has been enforced on members of all faiths – under the threat of violence for noncompliance. One example of this is "Islamic" styles of clothing being enforced through the northern regions under jihadist domination. This imposition can also be found in some extremist-held areas elsewhere in the country.<sup>65</sup>

A woman at the IDP camp in Koudougou – most of the IDPs there are Muslims and adherents of traditional African religions.



## CASE STUDY

# Nigeria: 41 worshippers killed during Mass

Gunmen disguised as worshippers opened fire on the congregation inside St Francis Xavier's Catholic Church in Owo, south-west Nigeria on Pentecost Sunday (5<sup>th</sup> June) 2022. Another group of armed militants simultaneously detonated explosives outside the church and shot at those trying to flee.<sup>66</sup>

The extremists killed 41 and injured more than 80 parishioners at the packed church, Bishop Jude Arogundade of Ondo Diocese told ACN.

The perpetrators are still at large, despite some initial arrests. ISWAP has claimed responsibility for the massacre, but Nigerian authorities have failed to identify and apprehend the terrorists.<sup>67</sup>

Bishop Arogundade highlighted the consequences of the attack: "The impact is both physical and psychological. So many people are afraid to practise their faith publicly." He called for a "sober reflection on how far we are ready to go to protect human life and its dignity and sanctity as a nation". He stressed the importance of reminding "the world of the evil of terrorism and the long-time effects it has on people". The bishop remains committed to urging those in positions of power to take the necessary steps to prevent similar tragedies.

The parish priest, Father Michael Abugan, expressed his concern that the community is not going to be at peace until the assailants are held to account. He explained: "Because of the lack of justice, people are not feeling comfortable. They don't know whether the terrorists might attack another time." Despite no one having been charged in connection with the atrocity, Father Abugan refuses to give up hope, stating: "We don't want to believe that justice will be denied. We are hoping, and we know that one day the government will do what is necessary to bring the perpetrators to justice."

Margaret Attah, a nurse, lost both legs and her sight in one eye in a bomb blast. She said about the lack of justice: "It makes us feel insecure, and it will give the perpetrators more power to continue [killing people]."

On the first anniversary of the massacre, ACN (UK) submitted a petition to Fiona Bruce MP, the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, asking the UK Government to call on its Nigerian counterparts to hold to account the extremists behind the attack, as well as those responsible for many other killings and abductions of Christians in the country.<sup>68</sup>

(Top) St Francis Xavier's Church, Owo.  
(Bottom) Five-year-old Vincent being cared for at St Louis Hospital following the attack on St Francis Xavier's Church.



## Afterword

By Regina Lynch,  
Executive President, ACN International

Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) is a Catholic charity established in 1947 to help serve suffering and persecuted Christians around the world who are in pastoral and material need. For over 75 years, the projects of the pontifical foundation have sought to keep the Faith alive in areas of the world where the Catholic Church is encountering discrimination, oppression, and persecution.

Although these projects respond to requests from bishops and our other project partners, and are channelled through the Catholic Church, ACN's aid frequently benefits other religious communities too, both directly and indirectly. For example, in Lebanon where ACN supports Catholic schools, most of the students are Muslim. These Muslim families seek out Catholic education because of its high quality. This also fosters dialogue between the various religious communities.

In sub-Saharan Africa where jihadist violence rages, when rural villages are attacked by Boko Haram or ISIS, villagers – both Muslim and Christian – flee to the nearest place of refuge; often, where there are neither military nor police, these victims seek shelter in church buildings. Here too ACN is called to assist priests and Sisters offering care and spiritual solace to those who are traumatised. As the Foreword by Sister Gloria shows,\* in extreme crisis situations, where NGOs, UN workers and diplomats have no option but to leave, the Catholic Church ends up being the sole provider of material and pastoral care – as well as a lone voice pleading on behalf of victims. The Church never leaves because she is of the land.

Since 1999, Aid to the Church in Need has been publishing the *Religious Freedom in the World Report* – a global analysis (196 countries) assessing the status of this fundamental human right for followers of all religious traditions. Often, we are asked: 'Why produce a report on religious freedom?' ACN's *Persecuted and Forgotten?* Report assesses the oppression of Christians, but this can only be understood in the context of the right of every individual to be free from religious coercion.

Feedback from previous editions of the *Religious Freedom in the World Report* has increasingly stressed a desire not only to be informed and to pray about the situation, but to take steps to help. People engaging with the report have told us they want to know whether there is anything they can do to help survivors of persecution and prevent religious freedom violations from occurring in the future.

One key response is aid. As a Catholic charity, ACN is providing support to over 5,000 projects in 132 countries around the world. In addition to the pastoral and emergency help, this religious freedom report sets out for the first time suggested advocacy actions for readers to take.

**Pray:** pray for the victims of discrimination and violence.

**Share information:** spread the word about this report in your networks – family, friends, in person and on social media – and highlight the report's Main Findings.

**Speak up for victims of persecution:** use this report to identify cases of individuals or groups of people who have suffered religious freedom violations, and advocate for them in your communities and networks using social media.

**Engage with politicians:** inform and encourage your political representatives (e.g. members of parliament) to defend the rights of those who suffer discrimination and persecution for their faith.

**Keep informed:** find out about new laws and policies which could be used to persecute vulnerable faith groups.

The ACN *Religious Freedom in the World Report* seeks only to collate information and provide analysis about the abuse of this fundamental human right worldwide. It is a tool. The tool is only as good as those who take it up, share it with others, and work to effect change.

\*Sister Gloria's foreword to the full Executive Summary is not included in this Africa Update but can be found online at [https://acninternational.org/religiousfreedomreport/news/foreword\\_2023](https://acninternational.org/religiousfreedomreport/news/foreword_2023)







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## RECOMMENDATIONS: NIGERIA

*Following the recommendations made by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Freedom of Religion or Belief in its report Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide? Three Years On, ACN puts forward the following recommendations, which substantially reflect and endorse those made in the APPG’s report:*

- 1 The human rights violations in Nigeria have a clear religious dimension which is not sufficiently acknowledged by the UK Government. The UK should acknowledge this and increase support for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) programmes and research in Nigeria. In addition, the UK should require an annual report on the state of FoRB in Nigeria from the UK High Commission in the country. The UK should also investigate the claim that the violence in Nigeria may be considered to be genocide or crimes against humanity, supporting the resumption of the ICC investigation into the situation in Nigeria.
- 2 The security crisis in Nigeria, and its implications for the right to FoRB in the country, is highly relevant to the UK-Nigeria Defence and Security Partnership. This partnership should be used to address the security concerns of groups which have been attacked, and to safeguard their well-being and human rights. Through this partnership, the UK should especially aim to prevent food insecurity by urging the Nigerian Government to prioritise the safety of farmers. Given the grave concerns around the Nigerian Government’s response to the security crisis, the Defence and Security Partnership should also be subject to parliamentary scrutiny.
- 3 With the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Middle Belt of Nigeria having exceeded 3 million, the UK should take steps to increase the support provided to individuals housed in official or unofficial IDP camps. The UK should also call on the Nigerian Government to present an expedient and viable plan for the return of the IDPs to their homes. The Nigerian Government should also enter into dialogue with Christian leaders, who have had their requests to have meetings to try and work together to ameliorate the crisis ignored.
- 4 The UK should urge the Nigerian Government to allow independent bodies to investigate claims of atrocities and support an international fact-finding commission to investigate Nigeria’s security crisis and its implications for religious minorities. Strong action should be taken against those determined by the independent bodies or the fact-finding commission to be implicated in committing human rights violations, inciting violence, or funding terrorism in Nigeria. These actions should include targeted sanctions under the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations and the refusal of visas, where relevant.
- 5 As part of the process of safeguarding human rights in Nigeria and other African trading partners, the UK Government should urgently publish its framework for monitoring the countries eligible for the new Developing Countries Trading Scheme (DCTS), and outline the process for suspending countries in violation of the conventions – including the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – in detail.