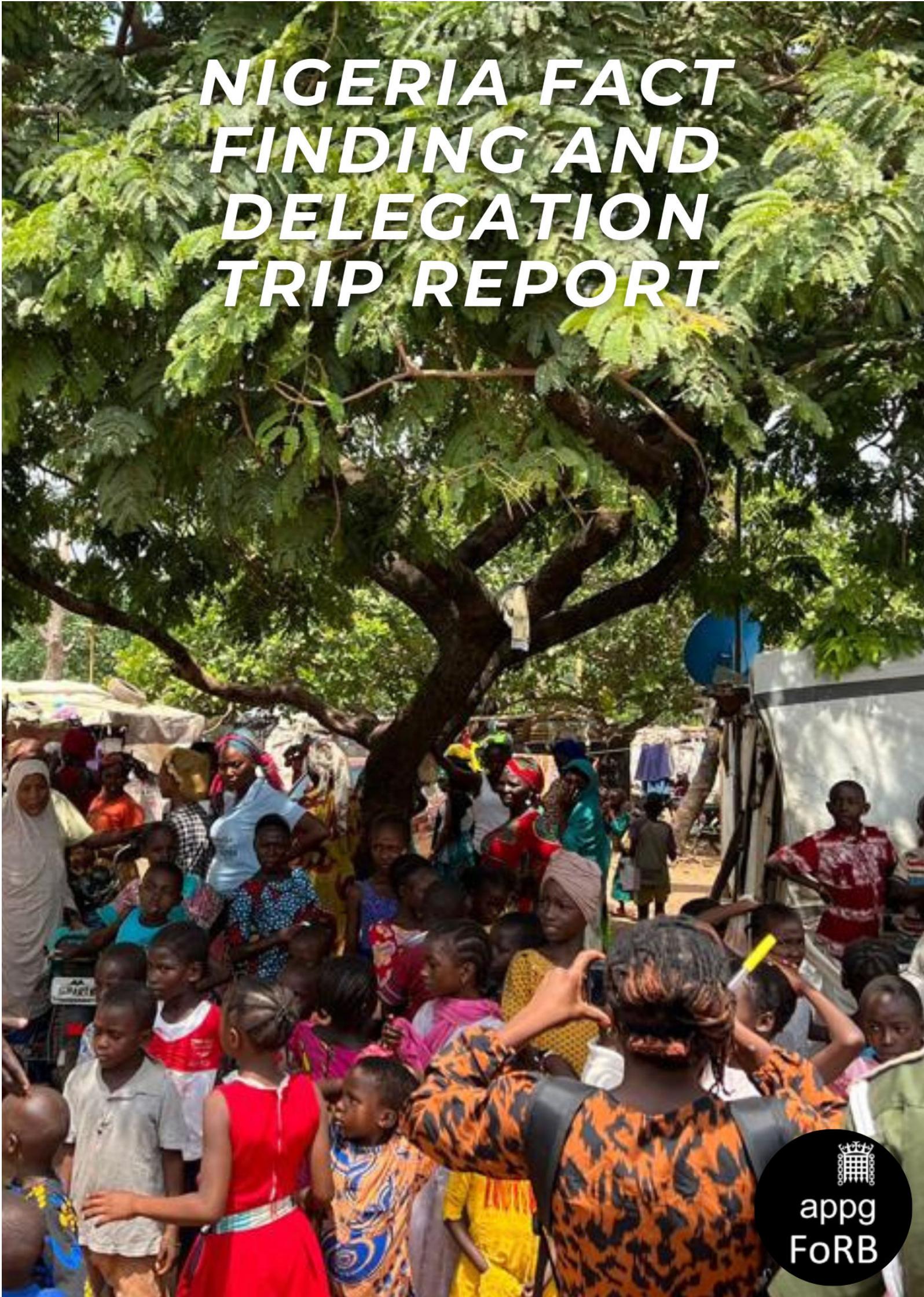


NIGERIA FACT FINDING AND DELEGATION TRIP REPORT



The All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for International Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is a group of over 160 cross-party parliamentarian members who champion the right to FoRB, as outlined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, among their fellow parliamentarians, policy-makers, the media and the general public, and pursue effective implementation of policy recommendations relating to this right. Established in 2012, the group benefits from the expertise of more than 20 human rights and faith-based stakeholder organisations.

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The work of the APPG is also made possible by financial support from the APPG's stakeholders, whose names can be found on the APPG's website via <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/stakeholders/>

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On May 28, 2022, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for International Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) travelled to Abuja, Nigeria. The APPG is a cross-party group of parliamentarians who believe that international freedom of religion or belief is a crucial human right. Their mission statement reads: “To raise awareness and profile of international freedom of religion or belief as a human right amongst parliamentarians, media, government and the general public in the UK; and to increase effectiveness and awareness of the UK’s contribution to international institutions charged with enforcing this human right.” The purpose of the trip was to follow up on the APPG’s investigative report published in June 2020, “Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?” which concluded that Christians were experiencing mass atrocities and violent acts including killings, kidnappings, and destruction of property. Although Shia Muslims, people of other beliefs such as Humanists, and other civilians have also been targeted in the wake of increasing violence across Nigeria, a disproportionate number of Christians are targeted because of their faith. Reported perpetrators of violence include Boko Haram, Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA), nomadic Fulani herders and militant vigilante groups.¹ The APPG delegation trip successfully interacted with members of civil society, government, and faith and belief leaders, who helped illustrate the factors that drive the conflict in Nigeria.

The APPG members present on the delegation were Jim Shannon MP, Chair of APPG FoRB; Baroness Caroline Cox, Member of the House of Lords; and Brendan O’Hara MP, SNP Spokesperson for Human Rights. They were accompanied by David Burrowes, the Prime Minister’s Deputy Special Envoy for FoRB; Julie Jones, Assistant Director of the Secretariat of the APPG FoRB; and Rachel Miner, Founder and Executive Director of Bellwether International.

This report provides a summary of the trip including policy recommendations that came from each meeting. The views expressed belong to those with whom the delegation interacted and not that of the UK Government or APPG FoRB. The APPG wishes to thank the British High Commission in Nigeria and the APPG FoRB Working Group on Nigeria for organising and planning the delegation. Special thanks to Rachel Miner and Bellwether International for helping prepare this report.

May 29

After arriving in Abuja, the delegation travelled to Kuchingoro IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) Camp where they met with the head of the camp. Delegates viewed the IDP school and medical centre. The APPG delegation met several survivors of Boko Haram violence in the

¹ Frequently, on the ground in Nigeria there is little clear division in nomenclature of Boko Haram and ISWA/ISWAP. In reality, if a group committing an atrocity called itself Boko Haram, it could belong to either group. This ambiguity should be noted for the rest of this report.

camp who shared stories of trauma and survival. Among these was John, the assistant camp manager, who had been attacked by Boko Haram many times:

“My dad was killed by Boko Haram, and many of my siblings. I was coming home when they killed my dad. It was so difficult in life afterwards. I love my dad so much. So the environment was unbearable...behind the house that we rent with my younger brother, there was a man and uncle to the boy that killed my dad. So we were attacked several times...I found a computer and learned the story of how my dad was killed on Saturday 27 September 2014... I now ask myself, if I were in the village when my dad had been killed, and there was a gunshot, what would have happened to me?”

John has now dedicated his life to helping those in the Kuchingoro camp, helping to deliver babies, and feeding and educating the young children in the camp. His leadership and sacrifice for others who have suffered inspired the delegation.

Another Boko Haram survivor, Martha, a Christian from Gwoza Borno State, shared her story:

“Sometime in 2014, we were home when information reached us that a group of armed men were attacking houses and killing men in our village. My family and I tried escaping when my father-in-law and husband were caught by the Boko Haram men. The two were murdered, were killed, while my life and that of my 8 children were spared. I then fled my village to Kuchingoro IDP camp where I’m staying. Life has been unfair to me and since I don’t have a steady means of income, I only go round houses doing menial jobs for people who pay for my service.”

Following the visit to the camp, the delegation connected with Mr Zannah Mustapha, Director of the Future Prowess Islamic School in Borno state, which has successfully integrated the local community school children and children of women who were raped by Boko Haram fighters. Mustapha is renowned for his work helping to release the captured Chibok girls, who were kidnapped from their school in 2008. As part of the meeting, Mustapha shared the importance of building bridges with the radicalised, the need for forgiveness, and the need for restoration of trust in the community. His daughter, Aisha, a student at the Prowess School, shared her testimony of attending the school:

“When I was seven or eight, I was in primary school when I joined and I was part of the first set. My classmates were part of the first students who faced a lot of the unbearable, memorable events of the Boko Haram insurgency. So a lot of them saw their parents get killed, or they were victims themselves, they had to get out of their own village of the local governments by themselves, and a lot of them lost families. And for me, I would say, I was lucky because I am coming from a normal home, that I haven't faced anything, but coming to meet them, I think opened my mind widely to how, you know, the reality of life. I would also say it made me grow up and in ways

that it has also changed my life, because I started to see the world from their own view, from their own perspective... I wanted the world to see that, yes, this thing has happened to them. They're resilient. But we also have to protect future children from this, because, for some of them, I think some of them have been used as child soldiers for a short while.”

Her story and spirit of forgiveness inspired the delegation to think about perpetrators of violence in a new context, and to contemplate the importance of youth in shaping the future of Nigeria.

May 30

On Monday, May 30, the delegation attended a civil society conference at Takunda House. Six organisations that work across the Nigerian diaspora shared thoughts on the insurgency in the north of the country, legal implications for freedom of religion or belief, and policy recommendations. Each organisation presented for 20 minutes, followed by 20 minutes of questions and discussion from the delegation.

Ms Fatima Njoku and Mr Mark Lipdo of Stefanos Foundation focused their comments on provisions of the Constitution that protect freedom of religion or belief and concerns of impunity. Main policy recommendations included asking questions of the government such as “What constitutes blasphemy?” and calling for a Constitutional referendum that reflects the desires of the Nigerian people and not a military government, which first implemented the Constitution of 1999. The Nigerian criminal law is implemented through the penal code in the north which incorporates elements of harsh Sharia punishment and the criminal code in the south. The disparity in the implementation of law and due process remains widespread.

Mr Optimist Habila from Community Action for Popular Participation (CAPP) focused his comments on the causes of persistent conflict in Niger and Plateau states. Using survey data, CAPP has shown that in Niger state politics and poverty are the main causes of conflict versus in Plateau/Jos where religion and settlement are the main causes of conflict. Habila further emphasised that Boko Haram are slowly taking over displaced communities and warned of genocide, especially for minority communities.

Ms Jessica Vonkat from the Country Women Association of Nigeria (COWAN) shared how she founded the organisation in 1982 and had to think strategically about how to harness the power of women in Nigeria. COWAN shared examples of selective justice, where religion plays into politics and impunity. Vonkat stated, “The Fulani will continue what Boko Haram has started,” reiterating that churches are targeted for violent attacks. COWAN has helped to implement food programmes sponsored by the government and has witnessed gross disparity in various government projects. In one project designed to feed school children, 14

cooks were promised and only seven arrived. No learning or education happened at the school and the children were not properly fed, Vonkat reported.

Reverend James Pam and Mr Sam Davwi of the Association of Middle Belt Ethnic Nationalities (ASOMBEN) shared statistics regarding the unfolding violence in Nigeria. They reported that Boko Haram is responsible for over 15,000 deaths and displacing two million people. They explained that the federal government built a local primary school in the Benue region and named the school after the Fulani Chief, in an area where Fulani attacks had resulted in many deaths. Pam and Davwi also called for a Constitutional referendum.

The International Centre for Peace Charities and Human Development (INTERCEP) representatives were Mr Paul Oguche and Ms Joy Ha, who shared their eight pillars of positive peace. Their policy recommendations included terminating the activities of conflict entrepreneurs – those who are benefitting from the arms trade and promulgation of violence. They also recommended resettling displaced people to homelands through peacebuilding and interfaith work. They said there was not enough government collaboration with civil society groups. INTERCEP has tried to address farmer-herder conflicts by making the local laws available in all of the native tribal tongues, as they explained many are unable to read the law because it is not provided in their language.

Mr Reuben Emmanuel, Mr Istafanus Gimba, and Ms Fatima Abubakar represented the Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA), Tearfund, and Search for Common Ground. They started by discussing the importance of including women and youth in freedom of religion or belief decision-making and advocacy. They recommended technical support on security and the need for collaboration with media, including the BBC, by providing religious literacy training.

Key recommendations from the civil society conference included:

1. Improve security agency capacity to uphold freedom of religion or belief laws and policies and respond without bias to religion-related conflict.
2. Strengthen faith actor capacity to access and resolve religion-related conflict.
3. Work closely with media houses e.g., BBC, to ensure factual reporting and data on FoRB issues.
4. Support Ministry of Justice and judiciary's capacity to charge FoRB-related violations under appropriate law(s), learning from the murder of Deborah Samuel in Sokoto state and charges brought against those responsible.
5. Help create resolution and awareness spaces by organising strategic dialogues on some of these issues, including roundtable discussions on FoRB violations.
6. Create support platforms for persons accused of blasphemy e.g. legal fees.
7. Increase coordination and cooperation amongst civil society organisations working on FoRB issues in Nigeria.

8. Enforce the legal separation between Sharia Law and Constitutional Law in the 12 states that have this dual system.

Following the conference, the delegation had dinner with Cardinal John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan, Father Cornelius Omonokhua, and Sheikh Nuru Lemu at the Deputy High Commissioner's home, where they discussed the root causes of conflict in Nigeria, and asked questions about the role of religion in the ongoing conflict. It was clear from the visit that the High Commission is well informed on the nature of religious conflict though there is more discussion to be had on how to label such conflict e.g. through the freedom of religion or belief lens while also being sensitive to the fact that religion has been used to further divide and polarise those in Nigeria. Much of the dinner conversation centred on this point, with no clear conclusion on how to label such issues and the ongoing violence.

May 31

On Tuesday, May 31, the delegation met with His Royal Highness Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, via Zoom, who emphasised that the violence unfolding in Nigeria is not a freedom of religion or belief issue even though there is religious violence: "Muslims are killing Muslims, Boko Haram targets all five people regardless of their faith." Sanusi illustrated that religion had been used to divert resources away from education and health care in the past, and "religion was commercialised," to further bad governance. He also called on the UK Government to stop supporting poor Nigerian governance.

Mr. Samuel Ortom, the Governor of Benue state, met with the delegation and shared his thoughts about the ongoing targeting and persecution of Christians, which he said was driven by Fulani "who want to take over the country, and this has been their plan for over 200 years." The Governor also stated that Benue is a particular target because of its Christian population and called on the UK to encourage the Nigerian Government to accept constitutional responsibility. "The government works with Islamists to bring fear to Christians," he said, also suggesting that additional security is needed.

The delegation then met with Dr. Nasir Sani Gwarzo, the Permanent Secretary of the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management, and Social Development, to learn about the steps this new department is taking to assist refugees and IDPs in Nigeria. Gwarzo shared his new IDP camp policy which is intended for camp managers and encouraged the delegation to meet with the Refugee Commission to share any additional concerns about IDPs. When asked about the IDPs in central Abuja, the Permanent Secretary stated that they had offered them land but all the IDPs declined the offer to take land.

The Deputy High Commissioner hosted the delegation for a lunch with Anglican minister Reverend Hassan John of the Anglican Church and Pastor Dr James Wuye from the Kaduna

Interfaith Peace Centre. Both men shared valuable insights on persecution faced by the members of their congregations in the north and the need for a broader coordinated response. Wuye emphasised the need to work with youth and convene an international conference to empower youth to promote peace across the country. John shared success stories of working with other Muslim leaders to promote interfaith dialogue and conflict resolution in the region. Both men illustrated the gap between government and civil society groups and reiterated the role of freedom of religion or belief in the violence experienced in Kaduna state.

The British High Commission also facilitated a meeting with businessman Mr Musa Bello and several of his colleagues who are actively supporting candidates in the upcoming presidential elections. Bello shared insights on Nigeria stating “there is an increase in outward faith, prayers are louder, mosques are fuller, but there is less God. Religion is not what you do but how you treat others.” Bello stated that bad leadership and corruption were to blame for the rise in criminal activity by Fulani groups. He shared that “Fulani Elders have lost control of their youth. Igbo Elders have lost control of their youth. Yamba Elders have lost control of their youth.” Bello and colleagues invited the UK to be more strategic in development funding, directly investing in education and the internet, urging that “Education is key!”

The delegation concluded the evening with a visit to the Christian Blind Mission’s (CBM) “Break the Cycle” project, which was a recipient of the Jo Cox Memorial Grant. The CBM Break the Cycle group focuses on empowerment to combat violence against women and girls with disabilities in Nigeria. The group discussed in depth the unique struggles of those with disabilities including facing incredible stigma from Nigerian society, ostracisation from the community, and extreme lack of resources including the scarcity of accessibility ramps to buildings and basic infrastructure. The group was able to tour facilities in Abuja and learn more about CBM’s work to help people with disabilities living in IDP camps in Nigeria. They presented the case for the interplay between freedom of religion or belief and those with disabilities.

June 1

The delegation had the privilege to meet with Boko Haram survivor Regina (whose real name is withheld for safety reasons) who was kidnapped because of her Christian faith. After weeks in captivity, Regina escaped, surviving in the wilderness for several days with no food or water. She shared her thoughts about the power of God in her delivery and that she hopes to serve as an inspiration for other Christians who have been persecuted for their faith.

The Human Rights Commission hosted the delegation to answer questions relating to their current work in Nigeria. Questions from the delegation included concerns over human rights violations by the military, reporting on atrocities, and the case of Mubarak Bala. The

Commission assured the delegation that there was active prosecution in process for those military members that are committing human rights violations. They acknowledged that the infrastructure to arrest terrorists is incredibly weak, and stated the need for rehabilitation of terrorist fighters, noting that convincing the community to take back the terrorists after rehabilitation is the hardest part. The delegation also enquired about the constitutional implications for human rights and blasphemy laws. The Commission reiterated that there is no section on blasphemy laws, but a section on insulting another person's religion or inciting violence, which provides space for the punishment of blasphemy. Lastly, the case of Mubarak Bala was discussed in detail. The tone was positive and encouraging.

The delegation shared lunch with the British High Commissioner Ms Catriona Laing and shared key insights from the trip and enquired into the High Commission's view of topics such as freedom of religion or belief and religious conflict. The High Commissioner shared thoughts on how security drastically decreased since COVID-19, which has led to many leaving the military due to lack of salary and, now unemployed, turned to violence across the country. Laing encouraged the delegation, however, by sharing details of the new Police Act and the work taken to hold police and military accountable for human rights abuses. Laing also said that the northwest is the most deprived region of Nigeria and it is this area that is seeing increased terrorism and vigilante attacks. Laing and her team are leading grassroots projects in the north called Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Nigeria (SPRING) which has a freedom of religion or belief element. She recommended that Parliament continues to coordinate with the FCDO on partnerships in Nigeria and engage more directly on issues concerning religion, victims of religion-related attacks, and those persecuted for their faith or beliefs.

Travelling to the Kukah Centre which houses the National Peace Committee, the delegation again met with Cardinal Onaiyekan, the Sultan of Sokoto, Bishop Matthew Kukah of Sokoto Diocese, and Father Atta Barkindo Director of the Kukah Centre. The Committee is independent from the Nigerian Government and is funded almost entirely by the European Union. They are focused on the upcoming 2023 elections and will begin their interfaith work and conflict resolution work as soon as the party candidates are formally announced. The Committee stated that the political environment has drastically changed since 2015 and said that the Christian-Muslim divide is a contributing factor to the current political environment. When asked about whether they would include youth on their leadership committee, they said that young people were uninterested, and if brought in they would also have to bring in women and other groups. They did highlight that individual churches were making efforts to include youth, yet there are no national efforts to include youth in the peace-building process.

The delegation then met with women from the Kaduna State Peace Commission who shared a history of the unfolding violence in Kaduna state. Ms Khadijah Hawaja Gambo is the acting Executive Vice Chair of the Commission and, alongside the Commissioner, Ms Rebecca Sako-

John started the meeting by recognising the history of stewardship the UK has had in Nigeria, as historical “colonial masters,” and emphasised that Nigeria is “passing through the hardest time in our history. Our reality is perceived differently by those of different backgrounds.” She reiterated that corruption has led Nigerians to feel hopeless, “which makes them more willing to die for something,” leading to religiously motivated violence. Gambo explained that the southern part of Kaduna state witnessed greater violence due to land claiming from many different ethnic communities including the Hausa and Fulani, and complications arising from the indigenous settler law. Population growth also furthers the violence, she said. Historically, Fulani herders had grazing routes for cattle, but as the population grows these lands are developed into housing and the herders no longer have access. They also lack a centralised leader to vocalise their concerns, which often leads to them taking the law “into their own hands.” When asked by the delegation about the case of Mubarak Bala, members of the Peace Commission did not know the specific details of the case. Their policy recommendations included pressing the Nigerian Government for greater transparency and an end to impunity.

The final visit of the day was organized by the British High Commission with Reverend Gideon Para-Mallam, Executive Director of the The Gideon & Funmi Para-Mallam Peace Foundation. The Foundation specialises in peace work in Plateau state, focusing specifically on citizen monitoring and restorative justice for peace. Para-Mallam explained that after a Fulani attack there is always retaliation, but through his peace talks they have seen a decrease in attacks over time. He highlighted that the Zango governorate in Katsina state is unwilling to cooperate with the rest of Kaduna state, and they need help to get cows, houses, and security for those in the Zango governorate who have been subjected to ongoing attacks. Para-Mallam has long been an advocate for Leah Sharibu and encouraged the group to continue to elevate her story and work with civil society groups to work towards her release.

The delegation also met, via Zoom, with Mr Leo Igwe, founder of the Humanist Association of Nigeria. Brendan O’Hara MP introduced the APPG and Jim Shannon MP shared the positive developments the APPG had taken to advocate for the release of Mubarak Bala. Igwe shared that the Humanist Association has been providing for Bala’s wife and son, including paying for housing, food, and other needed resources as it is not safe for her to participate actively in society with Mubarak Bala imprisoned. Igwe then shared in detail the challenges facing Humanists: “Nigeria continues to sideline other voices such as tribal leaders and Humanists. The exclusion of minorities is entrenched. Millions of people in Nigeria are not Muslim or Christian, and yet they are unaccounted for. Where are the religious others?” Igwe confirmed insights from others on the trip including the difficulty in living in the north or the south as a religious minority. “If you leave a major religion, you are denied family support which is everything in Nigeria. You are isolated and banished.” He stressed that many in Nigeria consider interfaith work as solely between “people of the book” or the Abrahamic traditions, systematically excluding other religious and non-religious groups. Igwe also shared alarming stories of people in a community pretending to be of a different faith to discover converts to

other religions or beliefs. Due to the extremely precarious situation of Humanists in Nigeria, Igwe mentioned that they do not always know where Humanists are or if they have been displaced. “Social media saved Mubarak’s life because we were able to quickly communicate, organise, and respond to his sentencing.” Igwe urged the APPG to encourage on the record interfaith dialogue in Nigeria that includes Humanists and other faith or belief groups that fall outside the Abrahamic traditions.

Recommendations

Following the delegation’s visit to Nigeria, the delegation concluded that:

The evidence gained from our visit was of a country that was tragically descending into lawlessness without good governance free from corruption. The hope is for fresh leadership to unite a divided country with a young demographic devoid of hope and liable to be exploited by criminals and militias. However, the delegation fears that the level of insecurity and targeting of individuals, and particularly Christians, because of their religious identity needs greater attention from the UK Government. In line with the Truro Review the Government should be clearer in calling out violence that targets religious identity and when the perpetrators are driven by religious ideology, whilst recognising root causes are complex and also often relate to competition over resources, historical grievances and criminality. The delegation affirms that where religion is a cause of conflict, freedom of religion or belief is the foundation of peace.

The delegation recommends that:

- The APPG continues to highlight the situation in Nigeria and individual cases in the UK Parliament through the securing of debates, submission of Ministerial Questions, hosting of events and other parliamentary opportunities to raise awareness of ongoing violence in Nigeria;
- The APPG engages the UK Government regarding the needs of Nigerians of all faiths and beliefs;
- The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office makes a report to Parliament of the steps they have taken to ensure vulnerable faith and belief communities have sufficient access to humanitarian aid and development funding;
- His Majesty’s Government encourages the Government of Nigeria to prosecute perpetrators of violence and fulfil their obligation to protect all citizens from killings, abductions, and torture, as well as loss of land and livelihoods;
- His Majesty’s Government continues to advocate for the release of Leah Sharibu;
- The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and the Human Rights Commission continues to work towards securing Mubarak Bala’s release and promote

an end to those parts of state penal codes in Nigeria being used to curb freedom of religion or belief.