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## Human Rights Council

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### Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

## **Written statement\* submitted by Jubilee Campaign, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[19 August 2022]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



## **General Persecution of and Genocidal Violence against Christians by Militant Actors in Nigeria Continue Unabated and Escalate in Intensity**

### **Introduction**

Jubilee Campaign would like to raise to the Council's attention the increasing intensity and prevalence of vicious attacks upon innocent Nigerian civilians by radical Islamic jihadists, including Fulani militants, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and Boko Haram. Secondly, we would like to highlight militant groups' use of mass kidnappings and abductions as a terror tactic. In 2020 the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court concluded that there is reason to believe that Boko Haram and its splinter groups are committing crimes against humanity and war crimes in Nigeria.<sup>(1)</sup> In November 2020, eight UN human rights experts released a joint statement urging the Nigerian government to "set up a credible, independent inquiry" into police brutality which has caused civilian casualties.<sup>(2)</sup> We echo the call to action we made in one of our previous Human Rights Council Session 49 written submissions in February 2022, in which we stated that the United Nations "must either encourage and assist the Nigerian government in establishing a mechanism to investigate, analyze, and preserve evidence of violent atrocities taking place in Nigeria, or otherwise take up the task of setting one up within the realm of the United Nations", similar to the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar<sup>(3)</sup> and/or the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine<sup>(4)</sup>, both of which were established by the Human Rights Council.

### **Christian Civilian Casualties**

Islamic jihadist terrorist groups are wreaking havoc on Nigerian civilians; the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Africa reported that between 1 October 2019 and 30 September 2021, jihadist assailants killed 8,560 Nigerian Christians and were responsible for a substantial portion of the 2,417 Muslim deaths during this period.<sup>(5)</sup>

In recent months there have been numerous horrendous violent attacks by Islamic jihadist groups, many of which victimized Nigerian Christian civilians. On Pentecostal Sunday, 5 June 2022, unidentified terrorists stormed St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Owo, Ondo, during prayer and worship services and shot indiscriminately at congregants, killing approximately 70. Though no militant group has claimed responsibility for the massacre, Ondo lawyer Adeyemi Olayemi explains that it is highly speculated that the assailants were radical Fulani militants.<sup>(6)</sup> Such would fit the standard of terrorist activity of Fulani militants who in late October 2021 killed two Christian worshippers and abducted a few dozen additional congregants while attacking a Baptist church in Kaduna State,<sup>(7)</sup> and more recently in April 2022 set fire to Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) in Plateau State's Miango District in a widespread attack in which they additionally torched 25 civilian homes and 40 agricultural stores.<sup>(8)</sup>

One thing that stood out about the Pentecostal Sunday attack in Ondo State, however, was that it was extremely unprecedented for its location. Typically, attacks on churches and Christian communities by Islamist militants are much more common in either the predominantly Muslim Northern Nigeria or the nation's Middle Belt region which acts as a de facto line of separation between the north and the predominantly Christian South. Ondo State, however, is one of Nigeria's Southern-most nations and in the heartland of the Christian South, sending disconcerting implications and setting a dangerous precedent of expanding Islamist militant activity in previously untouched areas. Already, another recent incident in Ondo State has increased the concern of such a devastating possibility; in mid-August 2022, Fulani militants kidnapped a Christian traditional community ruler in aforementioned Owo.<sup>(9)</sup> If such violence continues to expand, the region could become fraught with Fulani militant activity, often in the form of abductions and murders of Christian leaders, as is horrifyingly common in the North. In a late March 2022 Fulani militant attack in Kaduna State's Giwa County, assailants killed an estimated 50 Christians and abducted

another 100, including a reverend of St. Ann's Catholic Church; the militants went on to burn down personal homes, raze cropland, and kill farm animals.<sup>(10)</sup> A couple months later in June 2022, Fulani militant gunmen stormed Bege Baptist Church in Kaduna State, where they kidnapped five men and 31 women and children.<sup>(11)</sup> Two Christian siblings who survived a Fulani militant kidnapping at Emmanuel Baptist Church in Kaduna State in March 2022, a brother and sister, reported being beaten, physically tortured, and starved while in militant captivity; the boy was shot in the head by the assailants and left for dead, though he miraculously survived.<sup>(12)</sup> The siblings believe the attack was perpetrated to "send a message to Christians". Such is believed to be the rhetoric for and reasoning behind militant attacks on the Catholic community as well. After Aid to the Church in Need reported that at least 18 Nigerian Catholic priests had been kidnapped since the beginning of 2022, Bishop Jude Arogundade of Ondo reported his belief that attackers target Catholics because they know they will receive widespread media attention and because "the Catholic priests represent an international institution with a prominent message that challenges the message of terrorists".<sup>(13)</sup>

## **Persecution on Grounds of Alleged Blasphemy**

Over the past two years, it has increasingly concerned us that Nigerian Christians have faced ridiculous and disproportionate sentences for alleged blasphemy and have even been viciously attacked and killed. Most recently, in May 2022 in Sokoto State, a female Christian college student was stoned to death and set on fire by her Muslim classmates who claimed she had committed blasphemy a day earlier when she questioned why her class' WhatsApp group was discussing religious matters and asserted that she was able to pass her exams by believing in Jesus. In the days and weeks following, already two other Christian women have been accused of blasphemy and sought out by angry Muslim mobs for condemning the college student's senseless murder.<sup>(14)</sup> In April 2022 a Lagos-based Nigerian sex worker was beaten to death after a male customer found it blasphemous that she engaged in sex work while owning a Qur'an.<sup>(15)</sup> Also in April 2022, a mentally unstable water vendor was dragged through the streets of Bauchi State's Sade Village and stoned to death after he allegedly made blasphemous remarks in an argument with a non-paying customer.<sup>(16)</sup>

In April 2020, the President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria was accused by a law firm of making blasphemous remarks on the internet; the following day, authorities arrested him in Kaduna State and transferred him to Kano State where he was held for nearly two years until April 2022 when he was convicted and sentenced to 24 years' imprisonment. Another case is that of an Islamic gospel singer who was convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death in August 2020 for allegedly committing blasphemy by elevating an imam from the Tijaniyya Sufi Islamic order above the Prophet in one of his songs. Thankfully, with legal intervention, in January 2021 Kano State's High Court appellate division overturned the death sentence; regrettably, however, it remanded the case for retrial back to the court which originally sentenced the singer.

## **Recommendations**

Jubilee Campaign recommends member state of the UN Human Rights Council to:

1. Establish a mechanism to independently investigate, analyze, and preserve evidence of violent atrocities taking place in Nigeria, similar to the mechanisms established by the Human Rights Council regarding Ukraine and Myanmar.
2. Call on those Nigerian states with laws criminalizing blasphemy to abolish such laws.

- (1) Court Pénale Internationale/International Criminal Court, Statement of the Prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, on the conclusion of the preliminary examination of the situation in Nigeria, 11 December 2020.
- (2) OHCHR, UN human rights experts demand Nigeria investigate shooting of peaceful protesters by soldiers, 3 November 2020.
- (3) United Nations Human Rights Council, Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar.
- (4) United Nations Human Rights Council, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine.
- (5) Observatory of Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA), SOS Letter on Nigeria from Concerned Groups, 17 December 2021.
- (6) Jayson Casper, “Owo Church Attack Kills Dozens of Nigerian Catholics on Pentecost Sunday”, Christianity Today, 5 June 2022.
- (7) Evangelical Focus, “Two Christians killed, dozens abducted in attack on church in Nigeria”, 4 November 2021.
- (8) Andrea Morris, “Fulani Extremists Kill 3, Burn Church Site in Latest Attack on Christians in Nigeria – Villagers Say Gov’t Doing Nothing”, CBN News, 7 April 2022.
- (9) International Christian Concern, “Militia Kidnap Traditional Rulers and Kill Others in Nigeria”, 11 August 2022.
- (10) Morning Star News, “Terrorists Kill 50 Christians and Abduct 100, including Priest”, 28 March 2022.
- (11) Ken Camp, “Worshippers at Baptist church in Nigeria abducted”, 23 June 2022.
- (12) Agnes Aineah, “Harrowing Encounter of Nigerian Siblings Abducted by Fulani Herdsmen: Catholic Entity”, ACI Africa, 23 March 2022.
- (13) Douglas Burton & Luke Binniyat, “Nigerian militants appear to target Catholic priests for kidnapping: Why?”, Catholic News Agency, 14 July 2022. ; Giovanni Del Piero, “Kidnapped and Murdered Priests Latest in Nigerian Persecution”, Juicy Ecumenism, 3 August 2022.
- (14) Jubilee Campaign, Imposition of Capital Punishment for Apostasy, Blasphemy, and Religious Offenses in the 21st Century, May 2022.
- (15) Ibid.
- (16) Ibid.