

# NIGERIA 2021 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. The constitution provides for states to establish courts based on sharia or customary (traditional) law in addition to common law civil courts, although civil courts have preeminence over all other courts. Sentences may be appealed from sharia and customary courts to civil courts. In addition to civil courts, sharia courts function in 12 northern states and the Federal Capital Territory, and customary courts in most of the 36 states. Religiously affiliated state schools must admit students of all faiths or no faith; Christian-owned state schools must allow students to wear the hijab, while Muslim-owned state schools require all female students to wear it. Civil society organizations and media stated that general insecurity again increased and was prevalent throughout the country, particularly in the North West region. There were kidnapping and armed robbery rings in the South as well as the North West, criminal groups in the South South, and criminal groups and separatists in the South East, but there was a significant reduction in the number of violent incidents and deaths in the North East linked to the terrorist insurgency there. There were numerous violent incidents between predominantly Muslim herders and mostly Christian, but also Muslim, farmers in the North Central and South West regions and between predominantly Muslim herders and mostly Muslim, but also Christian, farmers in the North West. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, there were an estimated 1,112 deaths during the year from violence among ethnic groups, herders, and farmers. The government continued security operations and launched operations that authorities stated were meant to stem the insecurity and violence throughout the country. Some observers, such as the nongovernmental organization (NGO) International Crisis Group (ICG), said the government's efforts were inadequate. The Kaduna State Court released Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, head of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), a Shia political organization, and his wife in July. On several occasions, security forces clashed with IMN marchers, resulting in reports of casualties, including at least one death on each side, which both sides disputed. After detaining him for more than a year, the Kano State government in June charged Mubarak Bala, President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, with deliberately "posting blasphemous statement(s)...insulting the Holy Prophet of Islam" and Muslims in Kano State calculated to "cause a breach of public peace," among other charges. In January, the Kano State High Court vacated a sharia court's conviction and death sentence

of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu for blasphemy and remanded the case to the sharia court for retrial. The same high court acquitted a man convicted of blasphemy as a minor by the same sharia court and vacated his 10-year prison sentence. Kano State authorities banned Muslim cleric Sheikh Abduljabbar Nasiru-Kabara from preaching and charged him with blasphemy for comments he made during a television debate.

Terrorist groups, including Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa (ISIS-WA), attacked population centers and religious targets, including churches and mosques, and maintained an ability to stage forces in rural areas and launch attacks against civilian and military targets across the North East, according to observers. ISIS-WA increased its use of improvised explosive devices, which resulted in dozens of military deaths. Observers also reported that ISIS-WA expanded efforts to implement shadow governance structures in large swaths of the region.

According to NGOs such as ICG, the level of insecurity and violence increased, including in the predominantly Muslim North West, where expanded numbers of criminal groups carried out thousands of killings, kidnappings, and armed robberies. Because issues of religion, ethnicity, land and resource competition, and criminality are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely, or even principally, based on religious identity. According to information on its website, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), an NGO, reported 3,699 civilian deaths from the violence during the year, compared with 2,455 in 2020. According to a survey conducted by NGO Mercy Corps, a minority of the violence in the north of the country was interreligious, and both Christians and Muslims were perpetrators and victims. The NGO stated that “rather than religious belief or animus, we find that intercommunal violence is largely driven by insecurity and a lack of trust between ethno-religious groups competing for political power and control over natural resources.” The report also stated that “for a minority of northern residents ... religious freedom remains a concern,” if indirectly, because fear of attacks created a fear of gathering in religious communities and “exacerbates tensions and mistrust *between* religious groups – the primary pathway to intercommunal conflict in the north.” There were instances of mob violence against clergy and members of religious groups and mass killings of Muslims and Christians that press reports and observers described as planned and carried out by organized groups. For example, in May, criminals shot and killed eight Christians and burned down a church and several homes in Kaduna State. In August, Christian youths killed 27 Muslims on a bus in Plateau State. On September 26-27, according to international NGO CSW and subsequent reports by other NGOs and press, Muslim herders killed at least 49

persons and abducted 27, most of whom were Christian, in several attacks on communities in religiously mixed southern Kaduna State. In June, the Tiv and Jukun communities, both of which are Christian, clashed over land and water resources, often razing churches. On October 25, gunmen killed at least 18 worshippers and abducted 11 during early morning prayers at a mosque in Mashegu Local Government Area in Niger State. On December 8, at a mosque in the same area, ICG reported an armed group killed between nine and 16 persons and injured 12 others during early morning prayers. CSW reported several cases during the year of Muslim men kidnapping young Christian girls and forcing them into marriage and conversion to Islam.

The U.S. embassy, consulate general in Lagos, and visiting U.S. government officials – including the Secretary of State – raised freedom of religion issues such as the resolution of widely publicized blasphemy cases, the role of religious leaders in peacebuilding and social trust, and reports of societal abuses and discrimination against individuals based on religion during the year. These included meetings with government officials such as President Muhammadu Buhari, Vice President Yemi Osinbajo, Presidential Chief of Staff Ibrahim Gambari, cabinet ministers – including Attorney General Abubakar Malami, Foreign Minister Geoffrey Onyeama, and Minister of Interior Rauf Aregbesola – and National Assembly members. The Ambassador and other senior embassy officials regularly met with interfaith and religious groups across the country, including the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Society for the Support of Islam, the Islamic Society of Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of the Sunna (JIBWIS), and the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC). They met with religious leaders in Plateau and Taraba States to discuss and encourage efforts to promote peace and religious tolerance in those states. The embassy continued to fund peacebuilding programs in conflict-prone states such as Kaduna and Plateau, and interfaith dialogue training for leaders in six North West and North Central states. The embassy awarded five small grants to faith-based and community organizations to support reconciliation in communities, primarily in the North Central region, experiencing ethnoreligious violence.

The Secretary of State determined that Nigeria did not meet the criteria to be designated as a Country of Particular Concern for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe violations of religious freedom or as a Special Watch List country for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 when such designations were announced on November 15, 2021. Nigeria had previously been designated as a Country of Particular Concern in 2020 and a Special Watch List country in 2019.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 219.5 million (midyear 2021). The Pew Global Religious Futures project estimates the country 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, although a sizable minority follows the Shafi'i school of *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 Tijaniyyah, Qadiriyyah, and Mouride. A 2012 Pew Research Center survey found 37 percent of Nigerians identify with Sufi orders (19 percent identified specifically as Tijaniyyah and 9 percent as Qadiriyyah). There are also Izala and Salafist minorities and small numbers of Ahmadiyya and Kala Kato (Quraniyoon) Muslims. A 2011 Pew report found roughly one quarter of Christians 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, Church of the Brethren in Nigeria, 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, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, animists, and individuals who do not follow any religion.

Although accounting for far less than 1 percent of the population, there are also two distinct Jewish communities. The smallest of these are mostly foreigners, whom Israel and the diaspora recognize. A larger group of several thousand indigenous Nigerian Jews are not recognized internationally. There are also significant numbers of Sabbatarian groups, variously self-identifying as Christian, non-Christian, or neither. These groups include some that have adopted Jewish customs.

Islam is the dominant religion in the North West and North East regions, although significant Christian populations reside there as well. Christians and Muslims reside in approximately equal numbers in the North Central region. Christianity is

the dominant religion in the South West, including Lagos, which is also home to significant Muslim populations.

In the South East region, Christian groups, including Catholics, Anglicans, and Methodists, constitute the majority. In the South South, Christians form a substantial majority. There are small but growing numbers of Muslims in the South South and South East.

Evangelical Christian denominations are growing rapidly in the North Central and South East, South 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 region, while Nigerian Jews and Judaic-oriented groups are prevalent in the South East.

## **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 qualities, as a distinct component of the "national ethic."

The constitution provides for states to establish courts based on sharia or customary (traditional) law, in addition to common law civil (i.e., secular) courts, although civil courts have preeminence over all other courts. Sentences may be appealed from sharia and customary courts to civil courts. In addition to civil 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 noncriminal proceedings, but state laws do not compel participation in sharia courts in noncriminal cases.

Non-Muslims, as well as Muslims, have the option to have their civil cases tried in secular or sharia courts. In addition to noncriminal matters, sharia courts also hear criminal cases if both the complainant and defendant are Muslim and agree to the venue. Zamfara State law makes it mandatory for all Muslims to utilize sharia courts in such cases, but not in noncriminal cases. Criminal cases with possible sentences of death or life in prison may be heard by secular courts, usually at the preference of police.

Sharia courts may pass sentences based on the sharia penal code, including for serious criminal offenses for which the Quran and Islamic law provide *hudud* punishments such as caning, amputation, and stoning. Sharia penal code offenses and charges are only applicable to Muslims. Sharia courts operate under similar rules as common law courts, including requirements for *mens rea* and other due process considerations. According to the Chief Registrar of the Kano Sharia Court, by law defendants have the right to legal representation in all cases, and certain high crimes require the testimonies of four witnesses to be considered as admissible, corroborative evidence. Defendants have the right to challenge the constitutionality of sharia criminal sentences through common law appellate courts, and these courts have sometimes found for the plaintiff in cases where they have sued individual states for assault for penalties, such as flogging, imposed by sharia courts. The highest appellate court for sharia-based decisions is the sharia panel of the Supreme Court, staffed by common law judges who, while not required to have any formal training in the sharia penal code, often do and may seek advice from sharia experts. In some states with sharia penal codes, blasphemy or religious insult is a crime that may incur a fine, imprisonment, or in some cases the death penalty. The various states' sharia penal codes do not prohibit apostasy or heresy.

According to the federal penal code, any person who carries out an act “which any class of persons consider as a public insult on their religion, with the intention that they should consider the act such an insult, and any person who does an unlawful act with the knowledge that any class of persons will consider it such an insult, is guilty of a misdemeanor” and may be subject to imprisonment for two years.

The Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) authorizes the federal government to intervene in the management of private entities and gives it broad and discretionary powers to withdraw, cancel, or revoke the certificate of any business or association; suspend and remove trustees (and appoint any one of their choice to manage the organization “in the public interest”); take control of finances

of any association; and merge two associations without the consent and approval of their members.

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 stated that 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 states that no religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction to students of that community in any place of education maintained wholly by that community. The law requires schools that receive state funding (state schools) to admit and accommodate students of all faiths or no faith, regardless of the student's or school's religious affiliation. Christian state schools are required to allow Muslim students to wear a hijab. In Muslim state schools, the hijab is required of all female students, regardless of religion, as part of the uniform.

Katsina and Kaduna States have laws requiring licenses for preachers, places of worship, and religious schools. In Katsina State, the law establishes a board with the authority to regulate Islamic schools, preachers, and mosques, including by issuing permits, suspending operations, and imprisoning or fining violators. The Katsina law stipulates a punishment of one to five years in prison, a fine of up to 500,000 naira (\$1,200), or both for operating without a license. In Kaduna State, the Interfaith Preaching Council issues permits to those who wish to preach in public and regulates against the use of foul, demeaning, or derogatory language against individuals or other religions based on recommendations from the Local Government Interfaith Committee. Violators of the law are subject to fines and/or two to five years' imprisonment. Local government areas and states establish their own modalities for licensing public preachers, but do not license religious organizations.

In the states of Kano, Zamfara, and Sokoto, legally established Hisbah Boards regulate Islamic religious affairs and preaching, license imams, attempt to resolve interpersonal and family disputes between Muslims in those states, and work with police to enforce the respective states' sharia penal code. The states of Bauchi, Borno, Katsina, Kano, and Yobe maintain state-level Christian and Muslim religious affairs commissions, ministries, or bureaus with varying mandates and

authorities, while many other state governors appoint interfaith special advisers on religious affairs.

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

### **Government Practices**

Civil society organizations and media stated that insecurity was pervasive throughout the country and increased nationwide, particularly in the North West region. There were kidnapping and armed robbery rings in the South as well as the North West, criminal gangs in the South South, and criminal groups and separatists in the South East, but a significant reduction in the number of violent incidents and deaths in the North East. There was pervasive violence involving predominantly Muslim herders and mostly Christian, but also Muslim, farmers, particularly in the North Central, but also in the North West (where most farmers were Muslim), and South West regions. There were thousands of killings, kidnappings, and armed robberies. According to the Nigeria security tracker maintained by the Council on Foreign Relations, there were an estimated 10,399 deaths from violent conflict during the year, compared with 9,694 in 2020. Of the deaths in 2021, the council estimated 1,112 resulted from violence among ethnic groups, herdsmen, and farmers, some of which had implications for religion and religious freedom, according to multiple observers or, in the words of the council, “sometimes acquires religious overtones.” Other violent deaths were carried out by militants, Boko Haram, or government security forces. The council said the estimates were conservative and based on press reports.

During the year, the government undertook 20 targeted military operations, the stated aim of which was to root out criminals and armed gangs and to arrest perpetrators of communal and criminal violence. In May, the government launched Operation Whirl Strike, a security operation that it said sought to deter and minimize intercommunal violence in Benue and Nasarawa States. In October, the army launched Operation Golden Dawn with the stated intent of helping it confront security challenges that included armed criminal gangs, kidnapping, land disputes and communal clashes, chieftaincy disputes, assassinations, youth restiveness, and secessionist activities by the Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra, the Indigenous People of Biafra, and Eastern Security Network. In addition, in November, the Police Service Commission announced it would recruit 30,000 constables over the next three years to meet manpower requirements for the fight against insurgencies, armed criminal gangs, and kidnapping.

In response to increased criminality in the North West and South East regions, the Nigerian Police Force deployed more personnel and equipment on major road networks. State governors across the regions ran local “community policing” operations to combat kidnappings, primarily through state-supported vigilante groups such as neighborhood watch groups, the Nasarawa/Benue Agro Rangers and Livestock Guard, the Enugu Forest Guard, the Amotekun that worked across six South West states, and the Abia State and Anambra State Vigilante Services. According to observers, local media and officials, particularly in the South West region, often initially said Fulani herdsman were responsible for criminal attacks, but, upon further investigation, stated local armed criminal groups of various ethnicities perpetrated most incidents. In January, Chief Gani Adams, a traditional leader in Yorubaland, said, “The security threat we are having in the South West now, our people (Yoruba) constituted about 25-30 percent of the security threat.”

The government further implemented substantial reforms in the cattle-rearing industry with input from state and local stakeholders to facilitate and incentivize ranching over herding, with the stated aim of “combatting violence” between farmers and herders. To implement the National Livestock Transformation Policy (NLTP), in November, the federal government began to receive applications from states for allocated funds for herding-to-ranching projects, and disbursed funds to Nasarawa and Plateau States. According to NLTP Coordinator Andrew Kwasari, the work of constructing the first NLTP model farm for training the pastoralists began “in earnest” in Awe Local Government Area, Nasarawa State in December, adding that communities within the project site were “very happy with the initiative and committed to its success. The dialogue between the cropping and herding communities is most encouraging.”

Multiple sources, however, stated that the government measures were largely reactive and insufficient to address the scale of the violence. For example, in an update on the country issued in May, the ICG stated that, although the government had repeatedly pledged to curb violence, it lacked sufficient personnel and resources, and its military response had been inadequate. The ICG also said the government had made little progress toward resolving the farmer-herder conflict. The report cited the proliferation and evolution of the criminal gangs popularly known as bandits, stating the gangs spread from Zamfara to all neighboring states, including Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Niger, Kebbi, and Sokoto, and were expanding in number and size, acquiring more sophisticated weaponry, and carrying out an increasing number of abductions of students and others. The ICG said the insecurity could create more opportunities for jihadists in the region. According to

the report, attempted peace deals (including offers of unconditional amnesties) with the gangs by state governors had been unsuccessful, and all the governors, except for Zamfara's, had abandoned the deals. Benue State Governor Samuel Ortom also said the government's efforts to combat the violence were inadequate.

During his Easter homily, Catholic Bishop of Sokoto Matthew Kukah said about conditions in the country, "The nation has since become a massive killing field, as both government and the governed look on helplessly." He continued to criticize what he said was a lack of response from the government to violence in the country. President Buhari's spokesperson Garba Shehu reacted to the Bishop's statements by saying, "Some of the comments are no more than a sample of the unrestrained rhetoric Father Kukah trades in, which he often does in the guise of a homily... We urge well-meaning citizens to continue to support the ongoing efforts by the administration to secure the country and move it forward."

The military remained engaged in a decade-long war against terrorist groups Boko Haram and ISIS-WA, both of which killed or kidnapped Muslims and Christians. Boko Haram's Leader Abubakar Shekau was killed or killed himself in May, and Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi of Islamic State in the Greater Sahara died in August.

On October 19, the military announced it killed 24 suspected Islamist insurgents and recovered two gun trucks and destroyed another during an encounter with insurgents a few kilometers from Maiduguri, the Borno State capital. On October 25, Air Force spokesman Air Commodore Edward Gabkwet said the military carried out air operations targeting terrorist camps in the Lake Chad basin and stated several terrorists were killed. On October 28, the army announced it had taken delivery of 60 new armored personnel carriers to boost the war against the Boko Haram insurgency in the North East and banditry in the North West. Chief of Army Staff Lieutenant General Faruk Yahaya said the deployment of new platforms to the battlefield underscored the government's commitment to ensure that a state of normalcy was achieved across the country.

CAN stated Christians faced persecution from ISIS-WA and Boko Haram but that the problem also affected other groups. On November 20, CAN President Reverend Samson Ayokunle said the terrorist groups, "have joined other militant Islamic groups to be ferociously attacking churches, killing worshippers, and kidnapping for ransom. Though the madness has grown now and those who are not Christians are being attacked, killed, and kidnapped, this is because these criminal acts have become a lucrative business and it is whoever you can kidnap

for money! If the government had responded appropriately when this criminal madness began and subdued these evil groups immediately, we wouldn't be where we are now!"

The government's proscription of the Shia group IMN as an illegal political organization remained in place, and the government continued to state that the proscription was not directed against Shia Muslims. On July 28, the Kaduna State Court acquitted IMN head Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky and his wife, who had been imprisoned since 2015 on charges of "aiding and abetting homicide, unlawful assembly, and disruption of public peace" and released them.

In January, March, and May, protesters marching for the release of Sheikh El Zakzaky, calling themselves the Free Zakzaky movement, clashed with security forces. The NGO Shia Rights Watch stated that government security forces opened fire on Free Zakzaky protestors on May 7. IMN said some protesters were injured when police fired on them. According to press reports, police arrested 49 persons and stated that IMN protesters killed police officer Ezekiel Adama – which the IMN denied – and destroyed public property during the protest. On September 28, IMN members and security forces clashed again in Abuja during IMN's annual march coinciding with the Shia Muslim Arbaeen religious observance. IMN spokesperson Ibrahim Musa stated security forces killed eight marchers but later lowered the number to one. According to press reports, the government arrested 57 persons and denied any marchers were killed.

Several Shia religious leaders, including Sheikh Salle Sani Zaria, Secretary General of the Rasulul A'azam Foundation of Nigeria, criticized IMN as a political group that was not representative of the majority of Shia Muslims in the country. In Kano in June, Zaria stated that Shia Muslims throughout the country "make their religious processions unimpeded every Friday."

NGOs and others criticized the continuing lack of accountability for soldiers involved in the 2015 clash between the army and IMN members in Zaria in which, according to a Kaduna State government report, 348 IMN members and one soldier were killed.

In July, authorities detained for 20 days three visiting Israeli filmmakers making a documentary about Nigerian Jews in South East region on suspicion they were supporting the Indigenous People of Biafra, a group the government outlawed for its stated aims of seeking the separation of the South East region from the country, the leaders of which professed a connection to Judaism. Authorities released them

without charge, and they left the country. The filmmakers were allowed to retain their recordings.

In January, President Buhari expanded his policy of directing senior government officials to convene meetings with local traditional and religious leaders throughout the country. According to the President, the meetings aimed to reinforce community-based early warning programs and thereby help prevent religiously motivated violence and property destruction. Such meetings included those between Presidential Chief of Staff Ibrahim Gambari and Ministers of Interior Rauf Aregbesola, Works and Housing Babatunde Fasola, and Trade and Industry Niyi Adebayo with the Oba of Lagos, Relwanu Akiolu, the Ooni of Ife, Adayeye Oniton II, the Olubadan of Ibadanland, Obasaliu Adetunji, several bishops from different Christian denominations, and local imams. Media reported Buhari also chaired several National Security Council meetings to consider solutions to insecurity, some of which included enhanced grassroots peacebuilding and increased security presence in certain areas.

The government also said it promoted interfaith dialogue at the state and local level to address violence. For example, the Plateau Peacebuilding Agency incorporated an interreligious council into its operations throughout Plateau State. The Kaduna Peace Commission sought out national religious leaders to convene a meeting within the state to condemn the chronic violence there. Taraba State enlisted the help of the Taraba Interreligious Council to draw up plans to initiate a state government agency to promote reconciliation and peacebuilding. According to several local NGOs, various early warning systems operating throughout the North Central and North West were also responsible for preventing attacks from occurring. One NGO, the Para-Mallam Peace Foundation, said that, since law enforcement was often exclusively reactionary, citizen peacebuilding committees in local communities fearing violence or noting the seeds of conflict alerted police and other authorities in Plateau and Kaduna States in order to thwart plans of attacks or to calm brewing disputes.

In June, authorities filed 10 criminal charges against Humanist Association of Nigeria president and former Muslim Mubarak Bala on counts of making statements calculated to cause a breach of public peace by insulting religion, which carry a sentence of up to two or three years in prison per charge. The government charged Bala with deliberately posting “blasphemous statement(s)” to his social media account, thus “insulting the Holy Prophet of Islam, . . . [and] the entire followers of Islamic religion in Kano State, calculated to cause breach of public peace.” The Kano State prosecutor said the government feared Bala’s statements

would incite mob violence. After Bala posted statements on Facebook that state officials in Kano called “inflammatory and disparaging” towards Islam, police arrested him at his home in Kaduna State in April 2020 and transferred him to Kano State, where authorities imprisoned him without charge. Bala’s attorneys, NGOs, secular humanist groups, and others stated they believed he was arrested for his comments on Islam. According to Kano State Attorney General M.A. Lawan, when prosecutors indicted him in June, Bala was not charged with blasphemy under sharia because authorities did not consider him to be a Muslim. In December 2020, a Federal Capital Territory High Court ordered Bala’s release, but Kano State authorities did not release him because of what the authorities said was confusion over the federal court’s jurisdiction in ruling on Bala’s detention. Bala remained in detention at year’s end.

In January, the Kano State High Court acquitted 17-year-old Omar Farouq, whom a Kano sharia court had convicted of blasphemy in 2020 and sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment. The High Court ruled that Farouq lacked adequate legal representation during his sharia court trial.

Also in January, the Kano High Court remanded to the same Kano sharia court the case of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, whom the sharia court had convicted of blasphemy against Islam and sentenced to death in 2020. The High Court remanded this case to the sharia court for retrial, citing a lack of evidence presented. At year’s end, an appeal by Sharif-Aminu against the order for a new trial and seeking dismissal of the case was pending.

In February, Kano State authorities banned well known Muslim cleric Sheikh Abduljabbar Nasiru-Kabara from preaching following complaints from the Kano Ulama Council that his sermons would disturb the peace. In July, after he participated in a televised, three-hour debate in which he expounded on his religious views, Kano State authorities detained Nasiru-Kabara and charged him with blasphemy, saying statements he made during the broadcast insulted Islam. Authorities also ordered the closure of his mosque and affiliated religious schools and prevented his followers from protesting and carrying out the community’s annual Mauqibi religious festival procession. At year’s end, Nasiru-Kabara remained in detention, and his trial had not yet been scheduled.

At year’s end, Muslim cleric Abdul Inyass remained imprisoned pending an appeal of the death sentence he received following his blasphemy conviction in 2016. The Kano Sharia Court barred the public from his trial after a mob razed the courthouse following Inyass’ arraignment in September 2015.

According to the Chief Judge of the Kano High Court as well as the Chief Registrar of the Sharia Court in Kano, the secular court system has always vacated death sentences for blasphemy in that state on appeal. The Chief Judge said that a death sentence for blasphemy helps to assuage mobs who might seek to lynch the offending individual, keeping public peace while enabling the individual to quietly move out of the state.

There were reports that Hisbah Boards detained, abused, harassed, or intimidated individuals while enforcing their respective state's sharia penal code. In January, Hisbah officials in Kano State reportedly arrested barber Elija Ode for giving a customer a "blasphemous" haircut before later releasing him, stating the accusation had been a "misunderstanding." In July, a Kano Hisbah group arrested five Muslim men on "suspicion of homosexuality," a crime punishable by caning, imprisonment, or death by stoning. The accused were tried, convicted, caned, and released within two weeks.

During the year, the Kano State Films and Censors Board (KSFCB), a government organization responsible for regulating music and film, began requiring poets and singers to obtain a license to perform all new materials. It also took into account the views of Kano's Ulama Council, an informal gathering of respected Muslim clerics representing each of Kano's various Muslim groups, to which the state government often defers on matters that could affect public peace. In June, Kano State authorities arrested Ahmad Abdul for allegedly insulting Allah in a song he released without vetting it with the KSFCB. Authorities subsequently released him after he apologized for circumventing the KSFCB.

In May, after an internal dispute among members of the local Muslim community over the installation of a new imam, the Osun State government closed the Inisha Central Mosque to forestall, according to the state government, a religious sectarian crisis from which the government feared violence. The government reopened the mosque in July.

CSW reported that in October, the Kaduna State government demolished 263 buildings in the predominantly Christian Gracelands community in Zaria, including six churches, a school complex, and homes. According to CSW, state authorities said the land belonged to an aviation college, but community members said state authorities had granted them certificates of ownership for the land more than 20 years earlier in most cases and that they had been paying all required taxes.

Members of both Christian and Muslim groups continued to report some state and federal government laws discriminated against them. For example, they stated the Kaduna State Town and Urban Planning Law only allowed the construction of houses of worship in authorized nonresidential areas to prevent the conversion of private homes into houses of worship. Representatives of both religions complained the law is implemented unevenly and in a biased manner.

In April, CAN President Ayokunle accused President Buhari of “Islamizing” the country through judicial appointments to courts of appeal, stating that out of 20 judges recommended, 13 were from the north and seven from the south. In a statement, the CAN leadership called for “serious adjustments” on already executed appointments, stating that “Under the watch of President Buhari, especially throughout his first term, the judiciary was literally an appendage of Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs [NSCIA] because its members were in charge of its affairs.” The NSCIA called CAN’s statement “scurrilous propaganda.” According to the NSCIA, there were 70 appeals courts justices (JCAs) – 34 from the north and 36 from the south – and that the three geopolitical zones of the south had two Muslim JCAs, while the zones of the north had 15 Christians.

In August, the Anglican Church spoke against a newly enacted Anambra State law on burials that dictated the type, manner, and time of the religious service or rites and how they would be performed. The law was passed originally at the urging of the Catholic and Anglican churches to curtail what they saw as a trend of extravagant funerals. The Anglican Church later stated the final text of the law had been enacted without the Church’s input, which it said violated the country’s constitution.

Violence erupted in March when the Kwara State Governor confirmed all female Muslim students could wear the hijab in Christian-owned but state-run “grant aid” schools, per a Court of Appeal decision. Following the announcement – which came after some Christian schools in the state had said the hijab violated their uniform policies – 10 state Christian schools closed for a week in protest. When they reopened on March 17, five persons were injured in Christian-Muslim clashes when the Baptist Secondary School and Cherubim and Seraphim College prevented Muslim students wearing the hijab from entering. According to local press reports, Muslims attacked these schools and their collocated churches in the Sabo Oke area of the state capital, Illorin, in retaliation, breaking windows and causing minor damage.

The Judaism Fellowship Initiative of Nigeria, representing more than 50 Nigerian Jewish and Judaic-oriented congregations, requested the government organize and facilitate pilgrimages for Jews to Jerusalem as the National Hajj Commission does for Muslims to travel to Mecca and state and federal government Christian Pilgrims Welfare Boards do for Christians to Jerusalem, parts of Jordan, and Rome.

While the CAMA law enacted in 2020 allowing the government to intervene in the management of private entities neither specifically addresses nor exempts nonprofit, nongovernmental, or religious organizations, nor contains language about religion, some NGOs and religious organizations continued to express concern about the law. CAN and the NIREC continued to state that the law might allow the government to exert administrative control over smaller religious organizations that are organized as NGOs or as small religious schools with high tuition costs that are not legally considered charities. They said such state control would infringe on constitutional rights of association and freedom of religion, although no such cases were reported during the year. According to some legal scholars, the law was enacted to counter fraudulent NGOs that have served as fronts for money laundering or other criminal behaviors. CAN sued the federal government over the law in February, and the case remained in litigation at year's end.

State-level actors, including government, traditional, religious, and civil society organizations, regularly negotiated resolution of disputes. In February and March, prominent Muslim and Christian leaders organized by the Kaduna State Peacebuilding Commission led peacebuilding efforts following ethnic clashes in Kaduna State.

The community in Yelwan Shandam in Plateau State completed rebuilding the JIBWIS mosque that had been demolished during sectarian riots in 2004, and the mosque began operation in February.

In April, Akwa Ibom State authorities banned the use of state schools for church services after school authorities complained church attendees did not clean up following their services. Smaller Christian churches had often used the schools for worship services on Sundays but reverted to gathering in private homes or outdoors in compliance with the ban.

In April, the Bauchi State Interfaith Preaching Council indefinitely suspended Muslim cleric Malam Abubakar Idriss for preaching what it deemed incitement against rival ethnic groups.

President Buhari and Vice President Osinbajo regularly condemned attacks on places of worship and those attempting to exploit religious differences. Buhari regularly consulted with key Muslim and Christian leaders and celebrated both official Christian and Muslim holidays. In a statement on February 15, Buhari appealed to religious and traditional leaders as well as governors and other elected leaders across the country to “join hands with the Federal Government to ensure that communities in their domain are not splintered along ethnic and other primordial lines.” Reacting to intercommunal violence stemming from conflict over resources in the South West region, in a statement on February 15, Buhari stated that his “government will protect all religious ... groups, whether majority or minority, in line with its responsibility under the constitution.” Buhari again directed his Chief of Staff Gambari to lead a dialogue in each of the country’s geopolitical zones with state, local, traditional, religious, and security leaders. According to media reports, Gambari stated that he met with senior Christian and Muslim leaders, for example, CAN in September and NIREC in October, to address what the reports described as infringements on religious freedom and demonstrate the country’s high level of interreligious collaboration. In a meeting with supporters on June 30, Buhari said about the country’s rising insecurity, “Our problem is not ethnicity or religion. It is ourselves.”

### **Actions of Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**

Terrorist groups, including Boko Haram and ISIS-WA, continued to attack population centers and religious targets, including churches and mosques, and maintained an ability to stage forces in rural areas and launch attacks against civilian and military targets across the North East, according to observers. ISIS-WA increased its use of improvised explosive devices, which resulted in dozens of military deaths. ISIS-WA also expanded efforts to implement shadow governance structures in large swaths of the region. According to the Nigeria Security Tracker compiled by the Council on Foreign Relations, however, the number of incidents and deaths attributed to the conflict declined significantly during the year. There were 136 incidents involving Boko Haram (compared with 245 in 2020), resulting in an estimated 247 civilian deaths (738 in 2020), 1,065 Boko Haram deaths (2,086 in 2020), and 354 deaths among security forces (617 in 2020).

In January, Boko Haram insurgents attacked Gujba town, headquarters of Tarmuwa Local Government Area in Yobe state. Residents said the insurgents came in gun trucks and used heavy machine guns and grenades to destroy the town's primary state school and burned down a mosque and its only health center.

In April, Boko Haram attacked Kwapre, a community in Hong Local Government Area of Adamawa State. Local sources said they killed at least seven people, abducted several, and razed numerous houses and every church in the community.

In December, according to press reports, Boko Haram was suspected of firing projectiles carrying bombs at targets in the city of Maiduguri in Borno State just as President Buhari arrived on an official visit. Residents said one of the bombs fell on a mosque. Initial reports stated five persons were killed and at least eight injured.

On the seventh anniversary of the Boko Haram kidnapping of 276 mostly Christian pupils from the Chibok Government Girls Secondary School in April 2014, 103 remained in captivity, according to government and media reports. Seven Chibok girls escaped in February and a further two did so in August.

At year's end, Leah Sharibu, captured by ISIS-WA in February 2018, remained a captive, reportedly because she refused to convert to Islam from Christianity.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

According to government services, NGOs, media, academic, and other observers, the level of insecurity driven by rising criminality worsened during the year. Because issues of religion, ethnicity, land and resource competition, and criminality are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely, or even primarily, based on religious identity. Numerous fatal clashes continued to occur throughout the year in the North Central region between predominantly Christian farmers from various ethnic groups and predominantly Muslim herders. There were also incidents of violence involving predominantly Muslim herders and Christian or Muslim farmers in the North West region. In addition, criminal groups continued to commit crimes of opportunity, including kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, and banditry in the North West, North Central, and South East regions. According to security experts, the criminal activity in these regions increased in volume, geographic scope, and attendant violence during the year. Media reported on at least six attacks by bandits or armed criminal gangs on religious sites, including mosques and churches. Multiple

academic and media sources said banditry and ideologically neutral criminality, rather than religious differences, were the primary drivers of violence in the North West region. Christian organizations, however, said clergy were often targeted as victims of these crimes, because they were viewed as soft targets who often traveled conspicuously without security in the evenings, were typically unarmed, had access to money, and generated significant media attention. While many churches, including the Catholic Church, formally refused to pay ransom, some communities raised money to ensure the return of their religious leaders. Family members of kidnap victims also sometimes paid ransom. According to data ACLED cited on its website, there were 3,699 civilian deaths from the violence during the year, compared with 2,455 in 2020.

In May, Mercy Corps released a report entitled, *Fear of the Unknown: Religion, Identity, and Conflict in Northern Nigeria*, which reported on the religious attitudes of northerners it surveyed to gauge the perceived influence of religious actors, beliefs, and identities in violent conflict in the north. The report, based on in-depth interviews of 165 persons and a survey of 750 persons in 15 communities in Kano and Kaduna States, concluded only some violence in the north had been interreligious in nature and that Muslims and Christians were both perpetrators and victims. According to the report, “Since 2016, deaths from conflicts over religious issues have waned relative to the number of people killed by criminal violence and conflicts over land and cattle grazing. While deaths from inter-religious violence increased in 2020, they still paled in comparison to those caused by crime and resource conflicts. These trends were confirmed in interviews and surveys. Equally important, interreligious violence has been perpetrated by, and on, both Muslims *and* Christians.” The report stated, “Christians appear to have suffered more attacks on average, and likely as a result, they were more likely to report feeling victimized. Yet a majority of Muslim and Christian respondents said that members of both faiths are responsible for violence in their area, as opposed to pinning blame solely on one side.” The report stated that conflict data from multiple sources indicated that in the previous decade “only nine percent of attacks explicitly targeted or were carried out by religious groups, and only 10 percent of fatalities were ascribed to conflicts over a religious issue.” The report found that the more religious persons were, the less likely they were to support or engage in violence. It stated that, “rather than religious belief or animus, we find that intercommunal violence is largely driven by insecurity and a lack of trust between ethno-religious groups competing for political power and control over natural resources.” While religion, according to the report, was usually not a direct cause of conflict, political and religious leaders, as well as the public, appealed to religious identity and solidarity to motivate persons to take action and to garner

support to advance political, economic, or personal objectives. In addition, the Mercy Corps report stated religious leaders were important in both fomenting violence, by politicizing and emphasizing religious identity, and preventing it, by resolving disputes and promoting peace. The report also stated that “for a minority of northern residents... religious freedom remains a concern,” if indirectly, because fear of attacks created a fear of, or reluctance about, gathering in religious communities and “exacerbates tensions and mistrust *between* religious groups – the primary pathway to intercommunal conflict in the north [emphasis in the original].”

Numerous fatal intercommunal clashes continued throughout the year in the North Central region between predominantly Christian farmers from various ethnic groups and predominantly Muslim herders. According to the ICG, the causes of the North West turmoil were complex and interrelated, saying that “Environmental degradation and rapid population growth have aggravated resource competition between herders and farmers. Disputes over land and water prompted both herders and farmers to form armed self-defense groups, fueling a cycle of retaliatory violence that has taken on a communal dimension.” Several international and domestic experts stated that armed conflicts in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin had altered grazing routes and brought foreign transhumance (movement of livestock) groups in contact with new communities, sometimes leading to conflict because they were unaware of preexisting agreements between the local herding and farming groups.

Citing witnesses, media and NGOs such as CSW reported that on September 26-27, Muslim herdsmen killed at least 49 persons and abducted 27 in attacks on communities in three Local Government Areas in Kaduna State. According to the reports, most of the victims were Christian. In Kacecere village in southern Kaduna, eight persons were killed and six injured on 27 September; in Gabachuwa community in southern Kaduna, one person died, an unknown number were injured, and 27 members of Evangelical Church Winning All were abducted on 26 September; and 40 persons were killed and eight injured and 20 homes burned down in an attack on Madamai and Abun villages on 26 September. A Catholic priest who witnessed the attack on Madamai and Abun described it as “well coordinated” and “a massacre against the natives.”

On June 2, *Christian Post* reported that Fulani herdsmen killed Pastor Leviticus Makpa and his three-year-old son in their home.

*Morning Star News* reported that individuals, which it described as “suspected Fulani herdsmen,” kidnapped and killed Reverend John Gbaakan Yaji, a Catholic priest of the Minna Diocese, on January 15, during a return journey from Benue State. His brother, who was travelling with him, was also kidnapped, and his whereabouts were unknown.

On July 16, *Religion News Service* reported that bandits killed 33 persons and burned down four churches and hundreds of homes in Kaduna State.

On August 14, Christian ethnic Irigwes youths attacked a convoy of five buses carrying Muslims from Bauchi State to Ondo State as it passed north of the Plateau State capital, Jos, killing as many as 27 and injuring 14 people. According to local media, the attack heightened existing communal tensions and led to further clashes elsewhere in Jos and neighboring communities. Authorities subsequently arrested 20 suspects, but there was no further information on the status of the case at year’s end.

According to media reports, armed bandits killed 10 worshippers at a mosque in Yasore, Katsina State on the evening of October 5.

Also in October, bandits attacked a village in Kaduna, killing 17 and kidnapping 18 as they exited the mosque from early morning prayers. Police killed one suspected perpetrator.

On May 24, the newspaper *Christian Post* reported that bandits shot and killed eight Christians and burned down a church and several homes in Kaduna State.

On September 29, NGO International Christian Concern reported that Reverend Yohanna Shuaibu, the chair of CAN in Kano State, died from wounds he suffered during a mob attack. The mob, which also burned down the pastor’s church, school, and home, reportedly believed that Shuaibu had played a role in converting to Christianity from Islam a man who had recently killed his sister-in-law. According to CAN and media reports, authorities arrested and charged six persons in connection with the killing.

According to ICG, on October 25, gunmen killed at least 18 worshippers and reportedly abducted 11 during early morning prayers at a mosque in Mashegu Local Government Area in Niger State. ICG reported that on December 8 at a mosque in the same area, an armed group killed between nine and 16 persons and injured 12 others during early morning prayers.

On October 31, according to press reports and the ICG, suspected bandits occupied the Emmanuel Baptist Church, Kakau Daji in Chikun Local Government Area, Kaduna State during Sunday services, killing two parishioners, wounding several, and kidnapping 65. The abductors reportedly demanded 99 million naira (\$244,000) for the kidnapped parishioners, whom they released on December 4.

There were numerous attacks against schools in which armed groups kidnapped schoolchildren for ransom, which religious leaders stated impacted the broader activities of their religious communities. According to analysts, these kidnappings generally had a financial motive.

For example, in July, armed kidnappers abducted more than 120 students from Bethel Baptist High School in Kaduna State. The kidnappers demanded 500,000 naira (\$1,200) ransom for each student. Subsequently, some students were either released or escaped from the kidnappers. In May, according to press reports, armed kidnappers abducted 136 students from an Islamic school in the town of Tegin in Niger state, killing one person and demanding an unspecified ransom. In August, the school's principal told Reuters the kidnappers had called him and said six of the kidnapped students had died of illness.

On November 29, authorities in Zamfara State announced that the state's Christian community had received a letter from a group of bandits threatening "ferocious attacks" unless all churches in the state were permanently closed. In response, CAN directed its constituent churches to hold services only during daylight hours as an interim measure from December to end of February, while calling on the Buhari administration to ensure the protection of Christians in Zamfara and their religious freedom. Media reported some Zamfara Christians were contemplating relocating to other parts of the country. Police authorities in Zamfara said they created a special squad to patrol and protect Christian worshippers, especially on Sundays, and had deployed plain-clothes personnel for intelligence gathering to find those behind the letter.

CSW stated in November that Christian families in states that have implemented sharia continued to face abuses, including the abduction, forced conversion, and forced marriage of underage girls and reported it was assisting seven families whose underage daughters were abducted by members of their local communities. In three cases, the local authorities in Rogo in Kano State were reportedly collecting dowries on behalf of prospective suitors and offering them marriage "at no cost" by January 2022. Local media reported three Muslim men abducted and

forcibly converted to Islam three Christian girls from Nariya village in Garko Local Government Area, Kano State. The girls were in Hisbah protective custody at year's end, while the Kano State chapter of CAN took the matter to the Kano State High Court for the girls' return to their families.

On August 23, CAN President Ayokunle decried the violence and the government's lack of adequate response by saying, "Stopping killing of the innocent by the criminals cannot be done by merely issuing press statements and holding periodical meetings with the security chiefs by the president. Until the government shows the political will by arresting and bringing the culprits to book, the shedding of innocent blood will not cease. We charge the Federal Government to fix the security challenges or throw in the towel." On December 9, the Sultan of Sokoto cautioned assembled religious leaders about the reach of their influence at the quarterly NIREC meeting, stating, "We have to be careful in the way we handle, say and do things as religious leaders. We are not political leaders. Therefore, we have to be wary of what we say, where and how we say such things, because our followers will definitely believe in what we say. They will believe and feel that it is from the Holy Koran or the Holy Bible. We cannot go on telling things to people without thinking that they will believe. We cannot go on saying things that we know we don't have full knowledge of."

In June, local media reported Tiv and Jukun communities, both of which are Christian, clashed over land and water resources, often razing churches in Benue and Taraba States. After a pastor and his wife were killed in predominantly Jukun Tunga village, Taraba State, the predominantly Tiv neighboring village of Maigoge was attacked and its church burned.

The Enugu State government completed the rebuilding of two mosques that were destroyed during protests in 2020 in the state, and the mosques reopened.

A Pew Research Center study from 2018 found that more than 80 percent of self-identified Christians in the country said they attended worship services at least once per week. According to both Christian and Muslim religious organizations such as CAN and the Society for the Support of Islam, Nigerians attended prayers and services regularly, even in areas of conflict.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

The U.S. Secretary of State raised religious freedom issues with government officials in a visit in November, as did embassy and consulate general officials

throughout the year. Issues included the resolution of widely publicized blasphemy cases and the role of religious leaders in peacebuilding and social trust, and societal abuses affecting religion. They met with officials including President Buhari, Vice President Osinbajo, Presidential Chief of Staff Gambari, cabinet secretaries – including Attorney General Malami, Foreign Minister Onyeama, Minister of Interior Aregbesola – and National Assembly members. U.S. officials also addressed religious tensions and efforts to bring religious groups together with several state governors – including the governors of Kaduna, Kano, Benue, Nasarawa, Taraba, Borno, Plateau, Akwa Ibom, Enugu, and Abia States – and other government officials throughout the country. They discussed government and government-supported grassroots efforts to reduce violence, combat insecurity, and promote religious freedom and interreligious tolerance.

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. On November 19, the Ambassador and the Secretary of State engaged with religious leaders on societal and religious issues surrounding the country's insecurity. The Ambassador and other senior embassy officials engaged with various religious groups, including CAN, the Society for the Support of Islam, the Islamic Society of Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of the Sunna, and others throughout the year. In January, the Ambassador met with the Sultan of Sokoto, Sa'ad Abubakar III, the most senior Muslim leader in the country and head of NIREC, and other prominent religious leaders at an interfaith dialogue. In March, the Ambassador met with Muslim, Christian, and International Society of Krishna Consciousness leaders in Plateau State to discuss ongoing peacebuilding efforts in that region. In April, the Ambassador spoke at the Cardinal Onaiyekan Foundation for Peace, a Catholic civil society organization, on the role of women and religion. In August and September, senior embassy officials talked to the Taraba State Interreligious Council about its efforts to promote peace and understanding within religious communities in ethnically diverse Taraba State. Interfaith discussions sought to identify areas of consensus and narrow the gap between competing narratives regarding the main drivers of conflict in the country.

The embassy continued to fund peacebuilding programs in conflict-prone states such as Kaduna and Plateau. 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, such as the development of early warning systems that could alert law enforcement and other authorities in advance of communal attacks. "Peace ambassadors" from embassy-

funded projects continued to work to bridge the gap between victims, traditional/religious leaders, and the security apparatus in Kaduna State.

The embassy addressed conflict among targeted at-risk communities by facilitating dialogues between aggrieved parties, promoting respect for religious freedom, and training community and religious leaders to peacefully resolve disputes. Nine embassy-funded activities strengthened engagement and reduced tensions related to farmer-herders and other conflicts in Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, Benue, Delta, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kogi, Plateau, and Taraba States.

The embassy continued to fund interfaith dialogue training for leaders in six North West and North Central states. The embassy awarded five small grants to faith-based and community organizations to support reconciliation in communities, primarily in the North Central region, experiencing ethnoreligious violence.

The Secretary of State determined that Nigeria did not meet the criteria to be designated as a Country of Particular Concern for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe violations of religious freedom or as a Special Watch List country for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 when such designations were announced on November 15, 2021. Nigeria had previously been designated as a Country of Particular Concern in 2020 and a Special Watch List country in 2019.