



## Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

### Background on Nigeria September 2012

*I appeal to leaders for an immediate end to the killing of so many innocents....It is my hope that the various components of Nigerian society will collaborate so as not to start down the path of revenge, and that all citizens will cooperate in building a peaceful and reconciled society, in which everyone's right freely to profess their faith is fully protected.*

Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience statement, June 20, 2012

**BACKGROUND:** Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and one of its largest economies. Supplying the world with upwards of two million barrels of oil per day, Nigeria is also one of America's most important sources of oil. After a lengthy period of military rule, Nigeria returned to a civilian led government in 1999. Although the new democracy has produced more legitimate leaders, these new political leaders have not built a government that is effective, transparent and representative of the significant diversity in Nigeria. Building unity among the 250 ethnic groups and between the Christian and Muslim communities of Nigeria is a serious challenge. Corruption, political patronage, and the manipulation of ethnic and religious divisions for political gain have created general mistrust of the government, and outbreaks of conflict and violence.

According to the Pew Research Center, Nigeria is a deeply religious nation. Nigeria is home to three religious groups: those who maintain traditional African practices; Muslims, living primarily in the north; and Christians more concentrated in the south. While religion is often a defining characteristic of social groups and personal identity, faith tradition has seldom been the root cause of violent conflict. The federal and local governments control all oil revenue and access to land, fueling political battles over who controls the winner-take-all struggles. Political parties and their leaders often rally support by provoking conflict between religious and ethnic communities. They mobilize the large population of unemployed and disenfranchised urban youth to attack each other, creating a climate of fear and instability. Although Muslims and Christians are sometimes in open conflict with one another, the root causes of these conflicts are frequently mistrust of government, corruption and a search for political power by unscrupulous political leaders.

More recently, Nigeria has fallen victim to religious extremism. Since around 2002, a small Islamic sect known as Boko Haram evolved into small cells responsible for a series of violent acts against government buildings, police stations, schools, and Christian churches and some Muslim mosques. Located and operational mainly in the northern half of the country, Boko Haram has a vague goal of establishing a Muslim state and imposing Sharia law in Nigeria. Boko Haram's self-identification as "the Association of Sunnis for the Propagation of Islam and the Jihad," reveals its deep seated opposition to Western culture, education and ideas. This opposition extends to the Nigerian government, Christians and even Muslim leaders whom they believe to be corrupted by Western influence. The recent use of explosives and coordinated militant tactics suggests that Boko Haram has established links (not necessarily affinity) to other extremist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb and Al-Shabaab. Boko Haram attacks have killed over one-thousand people since 2009, most notably in fatal attacks on two Churches during Easter and Christmas Masses.

Most Nigerian Muslims reject Boko Haram, yet they harbor the same suspicions of the corrupt government that has neglected their needs. Police actions against Boko Haram often employ collective punishment of Muslim communities that aggravate existing grievances and tensions. On the other hand, Christians believe that the state has made undue concessions to Muslim Nigerians. In 1999 twelve northern states declared Sharia law, making Islam the *de facto* official religion, in violation of the constitution that established a secular state. Sharia was also imposed on Christians living in these northern states. In 2009 Nigeria rejoined the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), an international body created to promote Islam on a global scale. The government has too often sought the support of both religious communities to retain central authority while doing little to address the causes of the civil strife affecting Nigerians today.

These violent attacks have killed many innocent people and the imposition of Sharia law threatens religious freedom for Christians. Churches have been forced to set up security barricades and to frisk people entering church. People are now fearful of attending religious celebrations, bible groups and catechism classes. Christians in northern states must accept Islamic restrictions that do not exist elsewhere in Nigeria. Because mosques and Muslim leaders have also been attacked (although to a lesser degree than Christians), they too live in fear of being targeted.

In June 2012, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria issued a statement condemning the growing violence and rebuked the government for its inability to reestablish the rule of law. The Church has called on Islamic leaders to do more than condemn the violence. They have asked them to help the government to identify and root out those responsible for attacks. The bishops also called on all Christians to resist retaliation, remain vigilant and seek peaceful means to end the violence.

**USCCB RESPONSE:** In a letter to U.S. Secretary of State, Bishop Richard Pates, Bishop of Des Moines and Chairman of the Committee of International Justice and Peace, expressed his deep concern for the lives and wellbeing of innocent Nigerians. Bishop Pates' letter underlined the importance of security and freedom of religion, calling for "[t]he United States [to] strengthen its work with the government of Nigeria to improve rule of law and the protection of worship."

#### **USCCB Policy:**

- **The U.S. Government** should help the Nigerian Government build legitimacy through its efforts to:
  - Establish security and the rule of law while respecting the human rights of its citizens;
  - Promote the wellbeing of its people, protect religious freedom and rebuild peaceful relations between the religious and ethnic communities divided by political violence; and
  - Strengthen civil society and faith-based efforts to promote integral human development and peace and reconciliation among communities affected by violence.
- **The U.S. should** support the Nigerian governmental and civil society leaders to take the lead in finding solutions to the violence provoked by Boko Haram.

**Pray for Peace and Religious Freedom in Nigeria:** Pray for the people of Nigeria, especially those whose religious freedom is threatened. Engage your parish and encourage your fellow parishioners to find out more and to speak out.

**For further information:** visit [www.usccb.org/about/international-justice-and-peace/](http://www.usccb.org/about/international-justice-and-peace/) or contact *Steve Hilbert*: 202-541-3149 (phone); 202-541-3339 (fax); [shilbert@usccb.org](mailto:shilbert@usccb.org).

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