

# Factsheet: Religious Freedom in Nigeria 2020 Review

## Background

Since their independence from colonialism in the 1960s, Nigeria has undergone violent regime changes, ethnic and religious struggles, and significant socio-economic strife. With over 400 languages, 250 ethnicities, and a great diversity of religious and cultural backgrounds, Nigeria is struggling to respond effectively to the sectarian violence plaguing its people.

There are two main sources of violence in Nigeria. The first is the Boko Haram insurgency, a violent Islamist movement entering its third decade of operations headquarters in the northeast of the country. This group seeks to expel all western influence from Nigeria and, ultimately, is pursuing the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. The establishment of a caliphate in Nigeria would mean death and destruction for many minorities and Christians in the region. It is believed that Boko Haram is responsible for the deaths of more than 35,000 people since it was designated as a terrorist organization in 2009. The real number could be far higher, though, as many of the group's actions are never reported.

The second main source of violence in Nigeria is the radical Fulani militants behind the Middle Belt crisis. The Fulani are a migrant herder people group who span much of Sub-Saharan Africa. They are about 90% Muslim and, though most Fulani are peaceful people, some have become radicalized by Islamic extremist groups. This seems to be the case for large groups of Fulani in Nigeria. These violent groups, identified by ICC as Fulani militants, have wreaked havoc and destruction among mainly Christian farmers throughout Nigeria's Middle Belt for many years.

To date, it is estimated that between 20,000 and 50,000 people have been killed due to militant Fulani groups. This conflict is far harder to define than that with Boko Haram, as these groups do not have a stated agenda, open affiliations, or clear goals. It is also often unclear who the perpetrators are in attacks that are attributed to either Fulani militants or bandits. Despite this, they have shown a clear hatred for Christianity, as they have often target Christian places of worship or church leadership during attacks on villages. In contrast, they have not attacked Muslim mosques or clerics.

This report seeks to track these two groups and the chaos caused by them in 2020.

## 2020 in Review

The Northwest and Middle Belt regions in Nigeria continued to see violence at nearly the same rates as in previous years. Despite continued action by the Nigerian government against the Boko Haram insurgency, little progress has been made in protecting the vulnerable citizens of Borno State. With nearly 398 violent incidents attributed to this group in 2020, they continue to lead the country in total deaths caused and ranks as one of the world's most active and destructive terrorist groups. Coordinated efforts by the Nigerian, Nigerien, Chadian, and Cameroonian militaries have resulted in little more than the containment of Boko Haram to northeastern Nigeria and small portions of the bordering nations. Boko Haram's actions have also shown other criminal groups that violent and criminal activity can be very rewarding business in Nigeria. This has led to an increasing number of kidnappings for ransom throughout the country.

Despite Boko Haram's relatively high total death count, which includes their own personnel and members of the military who died in the line of duty, Fulani militant violence covers a far greater swath of territory. They also affect many more civilians, especially Christians, in their attacks. Fulani militants were attributed with at least 808 civilian deaths in 2020, compared to Boko Haram's total of 751. Also worth noting is that the Middle Belt crisis affects Nigeria's Christian population disproportionately since the population of northern Nigeria is mostly Muslim, while that of the Middle Belt is largely split.

As in previous quarters, the Nigerian government and military remained heavily involved in fighting against the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast but had nearly no interactions with Fulani militants. This is despite the fact that nearly all Boko Haram activity in Nigeria is restricted to Borno and Yobe states, with a few attacks in Adamawa, while Fulani militant attacks take place in 15 of the country's 36 states. This massive disparity in government intervention shows a concerning lack of interest in fixing the Middle Belt crisis.

## Methodology

Each case included in this report were verified by multiple sources, including the Armed Conflict Locator and Event Database, Nigeria's Silent Slaughter Tracker, the Center on Foreign Relations Tracker, local contacts, and media outlets. This methodology helps to eliminate false positives from the report, but it also means that there likely are cases which are not included. Thus, the actual number of incidents may be somewhat higher than reported here. The numbers below only consider incidents from the third quarter of 2020 in which Boko Haram or Fulani militants were clearly involved.

## By the Numbers

With at least 73 incidents of militant violence in the final quarter of 2020, Nigeria continues to be one of the most violent nations in the world. The two main aggressors, Boko Haram and Fulani militants, were responsible for a total of 410 deaths and a significant number of injuries and abductions as well.

### Casualties in Q4 of 2020

	Number of Incidents	Total Number Killed	Militant casualties	Government casualties	Civilian casualties
<b>Boko Haram</b>	57	357	167	28	162
<b>Fulani Militants</b>	16	53	4	0	49

### Injuries and abductions in Q4 of 2020

	Number of Incidents	Government injuries	Civilians kidnapped	Civilians injured
<b>Boko Haram</b>	57	29	108	67
<b>Fulani Militants</b>	16	0	10	15

### Casualties in the rest of 2020

	Number of Incidents	Total Number Killed	Militant casualties	Government casualties	Civilian casualties
<b>Boko Haram</b>	341	1976	1111	354	589
<b>Fulani Militants</b>	265	910	47	7	808

### Injuries and abductions in rest of 2020

	Government injuries	Civilians kidnapped	Civilians injured
<b>Boko Haram</b>	94	116	99
<b>Fulani Militants</b>	0	135	198

## **The Year Ahead**

2021 will be critical for the Nigerian government if they wish to turn the tide of violence that has been spreading throughout their country. If nothing changes, Boko Haram will likely continue to grow in strength. ISIS may move much of its operations to Nigeria as ISWAP, a breakoff group from Boko Haram, continues to gain ground and prove its capabilities against the Nigerian government.

Largescale abductions will continue in 2021. In a concerning trend, Nigeria has had increasing mass abductions of schoolchildren since 2014. These include: the Chibok kidnapping of 276 girls in 2014, the Malari kidnapping of 40 boys in 2015, the Dapchi kidnapping of 110 girls in 2018, and the Kankara kidnapping of 300+ boys in 2020. So far in 2021 there have already been three mass kidnappings throughout Nigeria. It is unlikely that these are all conducted by Boko Haram. Rather, it is likely that criminal organizations and groups have learned from Boko Haram's success in this area and are utilizing it for their own financial gain. According to a report by SB Morgen, at least 18 million US dollars have been spent on ransoms between 2011 and 2020. This staggering figure is likely to skyrocket as abductions increase.

Finally, as the Nigerian government continues to turn a blind eye to the Middle Belt crisis it will spread further south. New states find themselves struggling with increased violence and attacks each year. In 2020, Oyo state and Ogun states both struggled to quell violence attributed to Fulani militants. Despite this, the Nigerian government continues to claim that these are only regional or communal acts of violence and even to blame the local farming communities for the conflict.

## **U.S. Policy Recommendations**

The United States must consider the broader impact that the escalating situation in Nigeria could have on the larger West African region and across sub-Saharan Africa. The U.S. diplomatic mission to Nigeria has great potential to engage in meaningful efforts to reduce not only the current violence in Nigeria but also possible future violence in the greater region. The serious issue of growing and ongoing Fulani militant violence must be raised by the U.S. to the Nigerian government.

The U.S. should appoint a special envoy to Nigeria in order to more effectively track and report on the escalating violence taking place in Nigeria. This envoy should have extensive understanding of military operations, paramilitary tactics, and terrorism in order to effectively advise the Nigerian government regarding the mitigation of the escalating destabilization in Nigeria and the surrounding region.

The U.S. should also conduct a comprehensive analysis of U.S. aid distribution in the region to ensure maximum effectiveness of aid disbursement. The U.S. should consider restructuring its aid to channel resources to organizations with a vested interest in the region as a whole rather than giving aid to the Nigerian government which directs almost 100% of U.S. aid to the northeast of Nigeria. This issue should

be addressed and a more even distribution of aid throughout Nigeria should be pursued.

The U.S. needs to understand and broadcast the true nature of the violence in Nigeria. When investigating the situation in Nigeria, the U.S. government needs to ensure that all regions of the country are studied in order to dispel any misleading narratives. A comprehensive study of the violence committed by both Boko Haram and Fulani militants must be conducted. A bipartisan Congressional study on the issue would help to further this goal and inform the U.S. response to the situation in Nigeria, as would the establishment of a special commission to track the situation in an ongoing manner.

Finally, the international community must come to recognize where state and local governments are failing to adequately protect their people and take steps to address that negligence. Chronic failure to protect vulnerable minorities is a serious matter and should not be accepted by the U.S. or other countries giving aid to Nigeria.

