

Abuja Statement on the Crises in Central Nigeria

Issued by the Religious Liberty Partnership

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As members of the Religious Liberty Partnership (RLP) who met recently in Abuja, Nigeria, we express our condolences to all who have lost loved ones in the ongoing violence perpetrated by factions of the Boko Haram terrorist group in north east Nigeria, and are grieved by the plight of Leah Sharibu, the Christian school girl who remains in the hands of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) despite the negotiated release of her fellow hostages, and of her fellow captive, Alice Loksha Ngaddah. Moreover, 112 girls who were abducted from their school in Chibok in 2014 also remain in captivity.

We are also concerned by the violence that continues to devastate farming communities in Adamawa, Bauchi, Benue, southern Kaduna, Nasarawa, Plateau and Taraba states, and a concomitant proliferation of small arms that contributes to a general rise in insecurity. The death toll in these states, where thousands of men, women and children from minority ethno-religious communities have died and thousands more have been displaced in attacks perpetrated by a well-armed militia comprising of members of the Fulani ethnic group, is deeply worrying. Also worrying is the seeming lack of an effective security strategy to counter these attacks which, regrettably, has resulted in periodic retributive violence as communities conclude they cannot depend on government for protection or justice. Further, while the militia men reportedly are neither traced nor prosecuted, members of victim communities who articulate their concerns experience an array of repercussions that include threats, arbitrary arrests and judicial harassment.

While we recognise there is a long history of disputes between nomadic herders and farming communities across the Sahel, we believe the current attacks in Nigeria, which do not occur in neighbouring countries experiencing similar environmental challenges, can no longer be attributed to desertification or to a struggle for resources. They now occur with such frequency, organisation and asymmetry that references to ‘farmer-herder clashes’ no longer suffice. Significantly, in a ruling delivered on 26 February 2019 in a case involving militia violence in Benue state that claimed around 500 lives in 2016, the Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States rejected the characterisation of these attacks as communal clashes between farmers and herders, and also dismissed the contention that the government of Nigeria could not be held responsible for any ethnic crime committed by unidentified and unknown persons.

We stand with our brothers and sisters in Nigeria, who seek the restoration of security, justice, rehabilitation, reconciliation, peace, equality before the law, and respect for the dignity and rights of all of their fellow citizens, regardless of creed or ethnicity. We urge Christians worldwide to respond to this appeal for prayer and action in recognition of the Biblical injunction that we are One Body, and that “if one part suffers, every part suffers with it” (1 Cor. 12:26).

The RLP acknowledges

- The ongoing efforts of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), where Christian and Muslim leaders work together for peace, reconciliation and an end to religion-related conflict.
- The many peaceable Fulani herders and communities, and the commendable actions of 83-year old Imam Abdullahi Abubakar, who rescued over 300 Christians during militia attacks in Plateau State that claimed around 238 lives in June 2018.
- The ongoing plight of Hausa and Fulani communities in northwest Nigeria, which are also suffering kidnappings, murder and extortion by armed gangs, particularly in Zamfara and Katsina states.

- The assertions within the Nigerian constitution that the ‘security and welfare of the people’ are ‘the primary purpose of government’ (S114(2) (b)(c)), and the recognition of equal rights for all citizens, the sanctity of human life and human dignity (17:2,b).
- Nigeria’s constitutional obligation to respect international law and treaty obligations (19: d), and the duty of all Nigerians to respect the dignity and rights of fellow citizens (24 (c)).
- That despite increasingly challenging circumstances, the Church in Nigeria remains committed to the Biblical response of non-retaliation to violence.

The RLP calls on the Nigerian government

- To ensure that all of Nigeria’s religious communities enjoy religious freedom, including the right to manifest and propagate their beliefs as enshrined in Article 38.1 of the Nigerian Constitution, and in international statutes to which Nigeria is party.
- To urgently facilitate the release of Leah Sharibu, Alice Ngaddah and the remaining Chibok Girls.
- To review, recalibrate and strengthen the security apparatus in states affected by militia violence, directing the security forces deployed there to emulate the proactive approach of troops deployed to Zamfara with regard to protecting vulnerable communities and dealing with the insurgency.
- To end the judicial harassment and arbitrary detention of members of victim communities, and in particular, ensure the release of nine Elders from the Adara tribe in Kajuru Local Government Area (LGA), Kaduna state, who were detained during a series of targeted arrests in February and face dubious charges of incitement and culpable homicide, and 23 Adara youth, including several minors, who have reportedly been held arbitrarily since September 2018.
- To prioritise rehabilitation and justice for traumatised survivors, facilitate the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to ancestral lands, and ensure timely and adequate compensation for all, regardless of religious affiliation.
- To trace planners and perpetrators of violence, bringing them to justice swiftly and thereby contributing towards combatting impunity and strengthening rule of law.
- To combat the proliferation of small arms by locating and disarming militia men and prohibiting the possession and use of such weapons by civilians who have not complied with the criteria outlined in Article 14 of the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons.
- To urgently investigate and block the sources of weaponry and finance of every insurgency.
- To initiate a robust advocacy programme aimed at enlightening nomadic herders on modern techniques of cattle rearing.
- To promote the concept of equality of citizenship in locations where this is contested and consider the creation of an Equity Commission mandated to promote religious freedom and respect for religious diversity.
- To consider initiating civic education programmes promoting religious freedom, unity, and pluralism, and human rights and equality training for local officials and security personnel.

The RLP calls on the Nigerian church and religious leaders

- To continue to promote and practice non-violent responses to attacks, in line with Biblical principles.
- For the Nigerian Christian diaspora to stand in solidarity with, and take action to assist their brothers and sisters who are suffering severe violations in their home country.
- For the Nigerian Christian diaspora to raise awareness of the relentless loss of life in indigenous communities in central Nigeria, and petition the governments of their respective countries of residence and relevant UN officials for action to assist vulnerable communities, and for justice and due process in the cases of the nine Adara Elders and the detained Adara youth.

- For the Nigerian Christian diaspora to continually raise the plight of Leah Sharibu, Alice Ngaddah and the remaining Chibok Girls with the Nigerian authorities and with key members of the international community, including relevant UN officials.

The RLP calls on the worldwide church

- To stand with our brothers and sisters in Nigeria in prayer, and to provide long-term practical humanitarian support, pastoral care and trauma counselling, particularly those who have lost family and loved ones, livestock and livelihoods.
- To pray for strength, protection and wisdom for religious leaders in Nigeria as they continue to speak out against injustice and lead the Church during these difficult times.
- To raise awareness of the relentless loss of life in the indigenous communities in central Nigeria and petition the governments of their respective countries of residence and relevant UN officials for action to assist vulnerable and targeted communities.
- To engage with Nigerian diplomatic missions in their respective countries, pressing them to ensure their government makes every effort to trace, disarm and prosecute perpetrators of violence, regardless of their ethnicity or creed.
- To call for the release of Leah Sharibu, Alice Ngaddah and the remaining Chibok Girls.
- To call for justice and due process in the cases of the nine Adara Elders and detained Adara youth.
- To consider initiating an annual day of prayer for the Church in Nigeria.

The RLP commits

- To support efforts to ensure the religious rights of all Nigerians, including the rights to freely change one's beliefs and to manifest and propagate these beliefs, as per Article 38.1 of the Nigerian constitution.
- To support credible international, regional, and local efforts to end hostilities, reconcile religious communities, and seek enduring peace.
- To support local and international initiatives for peace-building and economic empowerment across faith communities that engage the youth in gainful activity, rendering them less susceptible to extremism or involvement in violence.
- To call for accurate and unbiased reporting on Nigeria by the international media, while encouraging similar accuracy in reports issued by member organisations.
- To call on the Church worldwide to partner with the Nigerian Church in extending assistance to victims of violence.
- To call for all of our constituencies, including in the Nigerian Diaspora and the Church worldwide, to pray for the Church in Nigeria as it seeks to respond in a Christ-like manner to religious liberty violations.

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- **Association of National Evangelical Jurists (ANAJURE), Brazil**
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- **Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Nigeria**
- **Colombia Para Cristo, Colombia**
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The Religious Liberty Partnership (RLP) is a collaborative effort of Christian organizations from around the world focused on religious liberty. The RLP seeks to more intentionally work together in addressing advocacy and in raising the awareness of religious persecution globally. For more information on the Nigeria Statement or on the Religious Liberty Partnership, contact Brian O'Connell, RLP Facilitator at: Brian@RLPartnership.org; +1 425-218-4718. Also see: www.RLPartnership.org.