

Legislators need to take action on Nigeria crisis

Jim Shannon MP



Over my ten years as a Member of the UK Parliament, the COVID-19 crisis has surely been one of the most difficult and surreal challenges I have experienced. Constituents have told me of their physical suffering, of job losses, and the pain of not being able to visit their loved ones.

This widespread and tremendous difficulty is a somewhat novel experience for many of us in the UK but for countless Christians living in Nigeria, extreme challenges are nothing new.

Shockingly for a Commonwealth country, Nigeria ranks twelfth on Open Doors World Watch List 2020 of the countries in which Christians are most persecuted.

One of the main drivers of this persecution in Nigeria is the militant group Boko Haram who frequently abduct and kill those who refuse to conform to their extremist brand of Islam.

On 22nd December 2019, in Borno state, Boko Haram jihadists attacked two passenger buses and released the Muslim passengers.

They then held back the Christians, separating the men and women.

A pastor from Deeper Life Bible Church and two other men were killed on the spot, while the pastor's relative and two humanitarian workers were abducted. On 26th December 2019, members of the Islamic State West Africa Province (a Daesh affiliate) released a horrific video, which showed the execution of eleven Christian prisoners – presumably to coincide with Christmas celebrations.

Then on Christmas Eve, another horrific report came from a Christian village near the town of Chibok in Borno. Numerous Boko Haram jihadists driving trucks and motorcycles stormed into Kwarangulum, firing at residents, looting all they could and burning their homes.

The saddest account of all emerged on Boxing Day 2019, when a Christian bride-to-be and her entire bridal party were massacred while traveling in Adamawa state to prepare for her New Year's Eve wedding.

Father Francis Arinse, a diocesan communications director of Nigeria's Catholic Church, reported that Martha Bulus, her sister Zainab and five others were ritually slaughtered.

As Nigerian Government Ministers have publicly and rightly admitted, Christians are being ruthlessly targeted, specifically because of their Faith. Undoubtedly, though, peaceable Muslims, through collateral violence, can also become victims of this cruel Islamist religious ideology. It is a destructive and divisive ideology which readily mutates into crimes against humanity and can pave the way for genocide.

We must not hesitate in saying so.

Unfortunately, Boko Haram are not the only threat that Nigerian Christians face. Attacks by armed groups of Fulani herdsmen have resulted in the killing, maiming, dispossession and eviction of thousands of Christians. It is difficult for us in the West to sometimes even imagine this kind of suffering, so it is important that we recognise the stories of survivors.

As Parliamentarians, I believe it is our responsibility to speak out on behalf of all the survivors and victims of violence, and all those who are suffering but who cannot speak out for themselves. One such survivor is Leah Sharibu, whose mother I was honoured to meet on a recent London visit. Two years ago, 14-year old Leah Sharibu was abducted by Islamist extremists from her school in Dapchi, north-east Nigeria. There are reports that she was enslaved, raped and impregnated, giving birth to a child, and that she has been denied her freedom for refusing to convert to Islam as a precondition for her release.

Leah represents the worldwide struggle both for freedom of religion and belief and the unacceptable violence directed at women and girls. There are thousands of Leahs held all over Nigeria, and across the world.

Among all the injustices for the UK to help correct in the near future, the widespread and growing persecution of Christians should be top of the list. These Christians, and other persecuted minorities, must be our priority in the aftermath of a pandemic that may devastate communities already threatened with extinction.

Thus, as the UK faces the challenge of lockdown and mass quarantine for the first time in living memory, I ask you to please spare a thought for those Christians who face not only a pandemic but also threats of violence and persecution that we can't imagine. I urge the UK and Nigerian Governments to do all that they can to bring an end to this violence and bring its perpetrators to justice.

• Jim Shannon MP is Chair of the All Party-Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief. The group comprises 100 British Parliamentarians from different political parties and from both Houses of Parliament. It exists to promote Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion."



Prelates lead a protest in Abuja, Nigeria, on 1st March over unending killings of Nigerians. Nigerian bishops called on the international community to help the West African country in its fight against ethnic insecurity and terrorist groups such as Boko Haram. (Photo: CNS/Afolabi Sotunde)

A genocide is taking place in the heart of West Africa

In a powerful report presented to the UK government by Lord Alton on Monday, the All Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief is asking for the world to wake up to the horrors of potential genocide in Nigeria. *The Catholic Universe* has been given special permission to print this edited extract from their harrowing report ...

[During the course of their investigations] APPG members have been alarmed by the dramatic and escalating inter-communal violence in Nigeria characterised as the farmer-herder conflict. This violence has manifested along religious lines, as the herdsmen are predominantly ethnic Fulani Muslims and the farmers are predominantly Christians.⁽¹⁾

The violence has claimed the lives of thousands of people and displaced hundreds of thousands more. It has caused untold human and economic devastation and heightened existing ethno-religious tensions.

For centuries, Fulani herdsmen have lived in relative harmony with settled farming communities. These two groups have benefited historically from symbiotic partnerships to keep cropland fertile and cattle well nourished. Disputes would occasionally arise, as herdsmen moved their cattle seasonally onto farming lands in search of water and grazing areas, but leaders would generally resolve them peacefully through established arbitration mechanisms which compensated losses and shared resources. Unfortunately, this relationship has deteriorated rapidly resulting in enormous violence.

The exact death toll is unknown. However, thousands of civilians are thought to have been killed in attacks led by Fulani herdsmen and periodic retaliatory violence.

Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust report that over 1,000 Christians were killed between January-November 2019, "in addition to the estimated 6,000+ deaths since 2015."

Amnesty International estimate that between January 2016 and Oc-

tober 2018 "at least 3,641 people may have been killed, 406 injured [and] 5,000 houses burnt down."

Local groups report higher figures: between January and June 2018, over 6,000 people were killed by Fulani herdsmen. International Crisis Group (ICG) estimate that over 300,000 people have been displaced and that the violence has claimed the lives of six times more people than the conflict with Boko Haram.

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Its geographical footprint is also larger, with conflict manifesting in more States. According to Search for Common Ground (SfCG), "between 1 January 2019 and 1 January 2020, inter-communal violence represented the most severe threat to civilian lives in Nigeria."

Mercy Corps report that the violence is costing the Nigerian economy £10.5 billion per year.

Some of the worst-affected areas include Benue, Plateau, Taraba, Adamawa, Kaduna, Kwara, Borno and Zamfara.

On 26 February 2019, the Economic Community of West African States Court of Justice ordered an investigation into mass killings and destruction of properties committed

⁽¹⁾ The APPG report emphasises the distinction between the Fulani in general (a diverse group of millions of people with hundreds of clans) and the sub-group of well-armed, radicalised Fulani who carry out attacks.

The story of Leah Sharibu



Leah, a bright 14-year-old girl, was living with her family in Dapchi, Nigeria ... until the morning of 19th February 2018.

Leah was at school when her village was attacked by jihadist militant terrorists.

She was abducted by the terrorists and brought into captivity along with 109 other classmates. They were forced to cram into vehicles and unfortunately five of the girls were killed by suffocation and trampling. One month later, the girls were returned to their village ... all except one.

Leah was not released because she refused to renounce her Christian faith and embrace Islam.

According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, she was subsequently given to a Boko Haram fighter as a slave.

In August 2018 an audio was released of Leah pleading for her freedom, and in October 2018 her parents revealed that Boko Haram had threatened to kill her later that month, should the government not meet their demands.

In February 2019 social media reports circulated about her death, but were dismissed by the government as politically motivated disinformation.

On May 14th 2019, Leah celebrated her 16th Birthday in Boko Haram custody. She has spent over 400 days in captivity. Over 5000 Muslims gathered to pray for the release of Leah on Thursday 16th May 2019.

After spending almost two years in captivity, in January it was widely reported that Leah had given birth to baby boy after forcefully converted to Islam and married off to a Boko Haram commander.

Her father, Nathan Sharibu, dismissed the report.

• For more information: www.leah-foundation.org

identical vision, some Fulani herdsmen have adopted a comparable strategy to Boko Haram and ISWAP and demonstrated a clear intent to target Christians and symbols of Christian identity such as churches.

The APPG received numerous reports that Christian pastors and community heads are specifically being targeted. During many of the attacks, herdsmen are reported to have shouted 'Allah u Akbar', 'destroy the infidels' and 'wipe out the infidels.'

Hundreds of churches have been destroyed, including over 500 churches in Benue State.

Jim Shannon MP, Chair of the APPG, summed up the group's concerns when he said: "Attacks by armed groups of Muslim Fulani herdsmen have resulted in the killing, maiming, dispossession and eviction of thousands of Christians."

As recently as 2nd April 2020, more than 300 Fulani herdsmen reportedly attacked the Christian village of Hukke, near Jos, killing seven and setting fire to at least 23 homes.

One survivor said: "I saw the Fulani as they came towards me, they started shooting, I fell and they passed over me into my house and killed my two sons, they then went straight to the pastors house and shot and killed him, they set some houses on fire and left."

On 7th April, Fulani herdsmen attacked Nsah village in Kwall district of Plateau State, killing four people, including Pastor Matthew Tagwi. One survivor said: "This issue of COVID-19, we don't know anything about it, but our problem is Fulani who are killing us."

On 14th April, Fulani herdsmen killed nine people including a pregnant woman and her three-year old child in Hura near Maiyanga village, Plateau State. A survivor said: "Fulanis came and almost surrounded the village shouting in their language; some shouting 'Allah u Akbar, come out, come out!' amidst gunshots."

The traditional ruler of the area, Ronku Aka, condemned the attack and said: "the incessant killing is more dangerous than Corona [sic] Virus."

On 19th April, Fulani herdsmen attacked Ntiriku village in Kamuru, in Kauri Local Government council of Kaduna State, killing three women and burning 63 homes. Another man died during the attack, suspected to be as a result of cardiac arrest.

The village head, Dauda Rogo, said: "Why did the Fulani leave the Muslims who are farmers and attack only Christians if this is not a religious issue? This is more than grazing land or farmers and herdsmen's fight over land."

Attacks by Fulani herdsmen have led to periodic retaliatory violence, as farming communities conclude that they can no longer rely on the authorities for protection or justice.

Some local vigilantes, led by youths, take matters into their own hands by going on violent

reprisals against Muslims who they believe are backed by the Government. Such retaliatory violence cannot be condoned.

However, their reprisals must be seen in the context of an urgent need for the authorities to enforce the rule of law to protect all its citizens.

As the Co-Chair of the APPG Baroness Cox has argued: "While the underlying causes of violence are complex, the asymmetry and escalation of attacks by well-armed Fulani militia upon these predominately Christian communities are stark and must be acknowledged. Such atrocities cannot be attributed just to desertification, climate change or competition for resources, as [the UK] Government have claimed."

Vice Chair of the APPG Fiona Bruce MP said: "Targeted attacks against churches and heightening religious tensions indicate that religious identity plays a role in the farmer-herder conflict" and Vice Chair Lord Alton of Liverpool said: "Some local observers have gone so far as to describe the rising attacks as a campaign of ethno-religious cleansing."

“ I saw the Fulani as they came towards me, they started shooting, I fell and they passed over me into my house and killed my two sons, they then went straight to the pastors house and shot and killed him, they set some houses on fire and left.

"Armed with sophisticated weaponry, including AK47s and, in at least one case, a rocket launcher and rocket-propelled grenades, the Fulani militia have murdered more men, women and children in 2015, 2016 and 2017 than even Boko Haram, destroying, overrunning and seizing property and land, and displacing tens of thousands of people. This is organised and systematic."

The Institute for Economics and Peace published figures in their Global Terrorism Index that so-called "Fulani extremists" are responsible for more deaths than Boko Haram since 2015.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) "documented 106 attacks on communities in central Nigeria during the first quarter of 2018 alone, which claimed 1061 lives, with seven attacks targeting Fulani herdsmen or communities within the same timeframe, two of them in the south, claiming 61 lives."



Men march alongside a truck on 11th January carrying coffins of people killed by Fulani herdsmen in Makurdi. The nation's Catholic bishops have condemned what they call 'the brutal massacres of innocent people'. Nigeria. (Photo: CNS/Afolabi Sotunde)

• All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief (15th June 2020)
Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide? New APPG Report Launched
<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/nigeria-unfolding-genocide-new-appg-report-launched/>

• The All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief exists to raise awareness and profile of international freedom of religion or belief as a human right among Parliamentarians, media, government and the general public in the UK, and to increase the effectiveness of the UK's contribution to international institutions charged with enforcing this human right.
<https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org>