

# **NIGERIA 2016 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. Human rights groups reported the federal government often failed to prevent, quell, or respond to violence affecting religious groups, particularly in the northeastern and central regions of the country. In November at least nine people were killed in Kano State in clashes between police and members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), the country's largest Shia group. In July the Kaduna State government released the results of its investigation of the December 2015 clash between the military and the IMN, in which at least 348 IMN members and one soldier died. More than 200 IMN members were awaiting trial as a result of that incident; the government did not charge any members of the army. Human rights groups called for the prosecution of military members responsible. The Kaduna State government banned the IMN. On January 4, a Kano State Upper Sharia Court sentenced cleric Abdulaziz Dauda and nine followers to death for making blasphemous statements against the Prophet Muhammad; the case was under appeal. In January a sharia court in Kano State confirmed the death sentences of an imam and eight others for blasphemy. Also in January a Kano sharia court convicted a Tijaniyah Sufi Muslim cleric and five others of blasphemy, and sentenced them to death. Both cases were on appeal at year's end. Religious groups reported instances in which neither the state and nor federal governments investigated, prosecuted, or punished those responsible for abuses committed due to religious intolerance, such as the November 3 release of five Muslim men arrested for the June 2 killing of a Christian woman in Kano. Members of regional minority religious groups said some state and local government laws continued to discriminate against them, including by limiting their rights to freedom of expression and assembly and obtaining government employment.

The terrorist organization Boko Haram continued to carry out numerous attacks, committing mass killings and often targeting civilians. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Nigeria Watch estimated activities by Boko Haram resulted in the deaths of 2,900 people, including Boko Haram members, a decrease from the 4,780 deaths recorded in 2015.

There were incidents of killings and other violence, motivated in part by religion, although observers stated there were other contributing factors, including ethnicity,

conflict over grazing rights, corruption, and criminality. In April herdsmen killed more than 300 people in the predominantly Christian Agatu community in Benue State. In Kaduna State, suspected Fulani herdsmen killed 40 people in October and 42 people in November. In October Christians reportedly killed 14 Fulani herdsmen in Kaduna State. There were religiously motivated attacks by mobs; one instance led to the deaths of eight Muslims in Zamfara State when Muslim students burned down the home of another Muslim for helping a Christian accused of insulting the Prophet Muhammad. Another mob killed a Christian man in May in Niger State for posting a statement considered blasphemous against Islam. A Christian vendor was also killed in Kano State for preventing a Muslim from praying in front of her shop. Muslim leaders publicly condemned the activities of Boko Haram as un-Islamic.

U.S. embassy and consulate general officials discussed and advocated for religious freedom and tolerance with National Security Advisor Babagana Munguno, Chief of Army Staff Tukur Buratai, Sultan of Sokoto Sa'ad Abubakar, and President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Supo Ayokunle. Embassy officials encouraged these representatives to address interreligious violence and called for timely legal action against perpetrators of violence. In visits to the country, the U.S. Secretary of State, Deputy Secretary of State, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, the U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, the U.S. Ambassador, and other officials met with President Muhammadu Buhari, state governors, senior federal and state government officials, leaders of religious groups, and NGOs to discuss religious freedom, affirm support for efforts to combat Boko Haram, and review efforts to improve relations between Christians and Muslims.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 186 million (July 2016 estimate). The Nigerian government does not track religion in census data, but a 2012 survey by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life estimated the population to be 49.3 percent Christian and 48.8 percent Muslim, while the remaining 2 percent belong to other or no religions. Many individuals combine indigenous beliefs and practices with Islam or Christianity. A 2010 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life report found 38 percent of the Muslim population self-identified as Sunni and 12 percent 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 groups, including Tijaniyah and Qadiriyyah. There are also Izala (Salafist) minorities and

small numbers of Ahmadi Muslims. Christian groups include evangelicals, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses. Other groups include Jews, Bahais, and individuals who do not follow any religion.

The Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri ethnic groups are most prevalent in the predominantly Muslim northern states. Significant numbers of Christians, including some Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri, also reside in the north, and Christians and Muslims reside in approximately equal numbers in central Nigeria and in the southwestern states, including Lagos, where the Yoruba ethnic group, whose members include both Muslims and Christians, predominates. In the southeastern states, where the Igbo ethnic group is dominant, Christian groups, including Catholics, Anglicans, and Methodists, constitute the majority. In the Niger Delta region, where the Ogoni and Ijaw ethnic groups predominate, Christians form a substantial majority, and a very small minority of the population is Muslim. Evangelical Christian denominations are growing rapidly in the central and southern regions. Ahmadi Muslims maintain a small presence in several cities, including Lagos and Abuja.

## **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 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 on the basis of religion or with names that have a religious connotation.

The constitution provides for state-level courts based on common or customary law systems, which have operated in the region for centuries. It specifically recognizes sharia courts of appeal in any states that require it, with jurisdiction over civil proceedings such as marriage, inheritance, and other family matters, where all the parties are Muslims. Sharia courts hear criminal cases in 12 northern states. State

laws on sharia criminal courts vary, but at least one state, Zamfara, requires that criminal cases in which all litigants are Muslim be heard in sharia courts. According to state laws, sharia courts may pass sentences based on the sharia penal code, including *hudood* offenses (serious criminal offenses with punishments prescribed in the Quran) and prescribe punishments, such as caning, amputation, and death by stoning. State laws dictate non-Muslims have the option to try their cases in sharia courts if involved in civil or criminal disputes with Muslims. Common law courts hear the cases of non-Muslims and Muslims (in states where they have the option) who choose not to use sharia courts. Sharia courts do not have the authority to compel participation by non-Muslims. Aggrieved parties can appeal sharia court judgments to three levels of sharia appellate courts. According to the constitution, decisions by the state sharia courts of appeal (the highest level of the sharia courts) theoretically can be appealed to the Federal Court of Appeal and then to the Supreme Court, although none has been.

Kano and Zamfara's state-sanctioned Hisbah Boards regulate Islamic religious affairs and preaching, distribute licenses to imams, and attempt to resolve religious disputes between Muslims in those states. The states of Bauchi, Borno, Katsina, and Yobe maintain state-level Christian and Muslim religious affairs ministries or bureaus with varying mandates and authorities, while many other state governors appoint interfaith special advisers on religious affairs.

Registration of religious groups is required for groups to build places of worship, open bank accounts, receive tax exemptions, or sign contracts. Religious groups planning to build places of worship must register with the Corporate Affairs Commission as an incorporated trustee, which involves submitting an application form, proof of public notice, a copy of the organization's constitution, a list of trustees, and a fee of 20,000 naira (\$66).

Both federal and state governments have the authority to regulate mandatory religious instruction in public schools. The constitution states schools may not require 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 have stated 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 says no religious community will be prevented from providing religious instruction to students of that community in any place maintained wholly by that community.

Several states have laws requiring licenses for preachers, places of worship, and religious schools of registered religious groups. A Katsina State law establishes a board with the authority to regulate Islamic schools, preachers, and mosques, including issuing permits, suspending operations, and imprisoning or fining violators. The Katsina law stipulates a punishment of one to five years in prison and/or a fine of up to 500,000 naira (\$1,600) for operating without a license.

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

### **Government Practices**

Clashes between police and IMN members resulted in the death of at least nine civilians. According to a Kaduna State report, a late 2015 clash between the army and IMN members resulted in at least 348 IMN members and one soldier dead. The government did not file charges against any soldiers after the incident; approximately 200 IMN members were awaiting trial for conspiracy and homicide. Sharia courts in Kano State confirmed the death sentences of an imam and eight others for blasphemy and sentenced a Tijaniyah Sufi Muslim cleric and five others to death after convicting them of blasphemy. Both cases were on appeal. Human rights groups and religious authorities accused the security forces of abuses and religious suppression when dealing with minority religious groups. Some Christian groups reported a lack of protection by government authorities for churches and Christian communities, especially in the central and northern regions. They reported discrimination in acquiring land permits to build churches and in admission to universities in the north. Muslims living in predominantly Christian states reported discrimination by state governments against such practices as women wearing the hijab. There were continued conflicts between displaced ethnic groups, known as settlers, and longstanding residents or indigenes, which the groups accused the federal government of ignoring. The differences between the two groups were frequently religious as well as ethnic and economic. State governments often granted preferential treatment, for example in access to education and jobs, to indigenes over settlers.

On November 14, Nigerian security forces clashed with members of the IMN who were marching from Kano city to Zaria, resulting in an indeterminate number of deaths and injuries. According to the police, nine people died, including members of the police, while the IMN said 100 of its members were killed and 87 detained. Other reports estimated several dozen dead and well over 100 injured as a result of the violence. Members of the Shia group were embarking on their annual symbolic pilgrimage to Zaria, Kaduna State, to mark the end of the 40-day period

of remembrance of the death of Imam Hussein. The violence began after an argument between the police and IMN members. The police stated an IMN member took an officer's gun, which resulted in other officers opening fire, while the IMN stated the police opened fire without provocation.

On October 7 the government of Kaduna issued an order declaring the IMN unlawful in Kaduna and stating that any IMN member would be prosecuted. According to the text of the order, Governor Nasir el-Rufai reached the decision in the exercise of his constitutional powers to protect "public safety, public order, public morality... [and] the rights and freedoms of all persons" in his state. The order cited the report of the state's judicial commission of inquiry el-Rufai appointed to investigate the deadly December 2015 confrontation between the Nigerian Army and the IMN in Zaria, Kaduna. In particular, the order referenced the commission's findings and recommendations that the IMN was not registered and should be "proscribed;" had a history of violence and aggression that culminated in the December 2015 incident; operated like a parallel government in disregard of Nigerian law; continued to hold unauthorized gatherings and processions in public spaces; and constituted "danger to the peace, tranquility, harmonious coexistence and good governance of Kaduna State."

The commission had issued its report on July 15, which concluded at least 348 IMN members and one soldier died during the December 2015 clash, which began with a roadblock by the IMN. The report also found that the army quickly buried hundreds of IMN members in a mass grave following the attacks. The IMN released a list in January of members it said went missing following the violence. The list included more than 700 people. The commission report found the army used "excessive and disproportionate" force, and recommended the military or the federal government attorney general conduct an independent investigation and prosecute anyone found to have acted unlawfully.

Katsina, Kebbi, Kano, and Jigawa States banned religious processions just prior to the annual Ashura processions, performed by Shia Muslims worldwide in remembrance of the death of Imam Hussein. On October 12, mobs and security forces in a number of northern states attacked Shia participating in the processions, killing at least 15 people. Authorities subsequently arrested hundreds of Shia and charged them with disturbing the peace. The Islamic Human Rights Commission said it echoed the IMN's statement that the arrests and charges were "an embarrassment to the nation" and called on authorities to release those detained, among whom were women and children, describing them as "prisoners of conscience."

On December 5, the government of Kaduna State released its White Paper on the Zaria incident of the previous year. The White Paper accepted many of the recommendations of the commission report, including that of proscribing the IMN and investigating and prosecuting army personnel found to have acted unlawfully. The paper also accepted the commission's position that IMN leader Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky be held responsible for the actions of IMN members during the incident and for any illegal acts committed by IMN members during the preceding 30 years. The paper declared the IMN "an insurgent group" that challenged state authority and that it should be treated as a threat to the government.

IMN leader Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky and his wife remained in custody without charges at year's end, although a federal High Court in Abuja ruled on December 2 that the federal government must release both within 45 days. More than 200 imprisoned IMN members awaited trial on charges of conspiracy and culpable homicide. At year's end, the government had not arrested or charged any soldiers as a result of the incident. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), a semi-independent agency of the federal government, also investigated the incident and recommended the speedy prosecution of IMN members as well as soldiers found culpable of abuses. In its report released on September 21, the NHRC stated the killings by soldiers of IMN members appeared to be wholly unjustified.

In January a Kano State sharia court convicted Tijaniyah Sufi Muslim cleric Abdul Nyass and five others of blasphemy for derogatory remarks against the Prophet Muhammad and sentenced them to death. Four other followers of the cleric were acquitted. All who were sentenced filed appeals. On January 4, a Kano State Upper Sharia Court sentenced cleric Abdulaziz Dauda and nine followers to death for making blasphemous statements against the Prophet Muhammad; the case was on appeal at year's end. Dauda allegedly said on May 15, 2015 that Sheikh Ibrahim Niassa, a 20th century Islamic scholar of the Tijaniyah Sufi order, had a larger following than did the Prophet Muhammad. The statement led to the burning of a sharia court in Kano the following week, as angry youths protested and called for the execution of Dauda. The case was ongoing at year's end.

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) said the government rarely investigated cases of violence or other abuses against religious freedom or prosecuted or punished perpetrators. It cited as an example the November 3 release of five Muslim men suspected of responsibility for the mob attack and killing of a 74-year-old Christian woman in Kano. The five men charged were released in November after the Kano attorney general said his review of the case

indicated that there was no evidence against the five accused men. The CAN said this reflected a pattern of impunity throughout the country.

Both Muslim and Christian groups reported a lack of protection by federal, state, and local authorities, especially in central regions, where there were longstanding, violent disputes between Hausa Muslims and Christian ethnic groups. In April the Movement Against Fulani Occupation (MAFO), an NGO, filed a suit against the government with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice for what the NGO said was a failure to protect indigenous Christian groups against attacks by Fulani herdsmen. According to MAFO, more than 1,000 people were killed in three years. Additionally, in November the ECOWAS Court of Justice heard a case filed by the Jama'a Foundation, a Muslim association in southern Kaduna, against the government for alleged failure to protect Muslims in attacks after the 2011 presidential election, when Human Rights Watch reported more than 500 people were killed, mainly Muslims. Additionally, Fulani Muslim herdsmen and Christian farmers complained of a lack of accountability in conflicts over land use. The Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeder's Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) stated that authorities consistently failed to bring to justice Christian farmers who killed their members and their cattle, while Christian farmers stated that previous cases of attacks against them remained unresolved with either no arrests or arrests without further judicial progress. MACBAN and World Watch Monitor stated the government made no attempt to address key issues, including accountability of the perpetrators for crimes committed, prosecution of perpetrators, or security.

A pending bill in Kaduna State would require all preachers to obtain preaching licenses or risk fines and/or imprisonment for up to two years. Deputy Governor of Kaduna State Barnabas Bala said the bill was proposed to protect the state from religious extremism and hate speech. The bill would also restrict playing religious recordings at certain times and places as well as prohibit "abusive" religious speech, which it did not define further. The draft bill generated widespread opposition from both Muslim and Christian groups, who cited fears that such steps would lead to broader government restrictions on religious organizations and general religious activity.

Muslim groups said public school uniforms, particularly in the south, were too revealing and thus discriminated against their standards. According to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), in Osun and Lagos States, public school authorities prevented girls from wearing the hijab at school as part of their uniform. On June 3, the Osun State High Court ruled in favor of the Muslim



community's suit against the state government, which banned the hijab in 2013. The ruling decreed female students could wear the hijab in government primary and secondary schools. On July 21, a court of appeals in Lagos State lifted a 2013 ban on wearing the hijab in government schools. The judges said the ban violated the religious rights of Muslim girls.

Christian groups reported authorities in northern states continued to deny building permits to minority religious communities for the construction of new places of worship, expansion, and renovation of existing facilities, or reconstruction of buildings that had been demolished. The Christian Association of Nigeria reported that local community leaders, traditional rulers, and government officials in predominantly Muslim northern states used regulations on zoning and title registrations to stop or slow the establishment of new churches. Church leaders said they were able to evade such restrictions by purchasing and developing land in the name of an individual member of their congregation or simply by building churches without permits, but this practice left them in a tenuous legal position.

Unlike in previous years, there were no reports by Christian groups of non-Muslims in northern states appearing in sharia courts against their will. According to these groups, most Christians in northern states had learned that they had the right to refuse to appear in a sharia court and exercised that right if they did not wish to use such courts.

State governments in Bauchi, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Niger, and Zamfara funded sharia law enforcement groups called the Hisbah, which Christian groups said enforced sharia inconsistently and sporadically, sometimes targeting Christians or residents of other states. While residents in areas traditionally set aside for Christians reportedly felt that Hisbah groups were generally more lenient in those areas, visitors or residents of other states and homes and businesses in predominantly Christian neighborhoods were sometimes raided as well. The Kano State Hisbah continued to arrest residents for alcohol consumption, begging, prostitution, and other purported violations of sharia. According to the NGO Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), a 15-year-old Christian girl was returned to her family in March after an investigation by the Sokoto State government Human Rights Commission. Two neighbors aided by the Hisbah in Sokoto State reportedly abducted the girl in August 2015 and took her to Bauchi State, where she was forced to convert to Islam and marry. Police arrested three people in connection with the abduction.

Christian and Muslim groups reported individual administrators of government-run universities and technical schools in several states refused to admit them or delayed the issuance of their degrees and licenses because of their religion or ethnicity. For example, in Borno State, Christians stated that they had been marginalized due to their faith and that Kanuri Muslims had been given preferential treatment for government jobs and admission to higher education. Mail & Guardian Africa, an African news website, reported that in Plateau State, Hausa Muslims stated they had been marginalized while predominantly Christian ethnic groups received preferential treatment. According to Christian and Muslim groups and NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, the issue was part of the country's settler-indigene conflict, whereby state governments granted benefits to ethnic groups considered to be indigenous to a particular state and distinguished them from ethnic groups considered to be settlers, even if their families had lived in the state for generations. In certain states, especially in the Middle Belt, the divide was religious as well as ethnic and economic, between Christian indigenes and Muslim settlers.

### **Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**

The U.S.-designated terrorist organization Boko Haram split into two factions during the year, one pledging allegiance to ISIS and calling itself the Islamic State of West Africa (ISIS-WA), headed by Abu Musab al Barnawi, and another headed by Abubakr Shekau and retaining the traditional Boko Haram name, the Jama'atu Ahl as-Sunnah li-Da'awati wal-Jihad (JASDJ). Most residents referred to both groups collectively as Boko Haram.

Boko Haram continued to commit acts of mass violence in its stated quest to impose its religious and political beliefs in the northeast. Boko Haram perpetrated numerous attacks, including mass killings, often directly targeting civilians. According to estimates from the NGO Nigeria Watch, 2,900 people, including Boko Haram members, died as a result of the group's activities during the year, compared with a press estimate of 4,780 killed in 2015. On January 30, Boko Haram raided the village of Dalori, three miles outside of Borno State capital Maiduguri, killing 122 people and abducting a number of children. In some cases, the group employed women and children as suicide bombers, such as in the October 29 suicide attack in Maiduguri that killed nine.

Boko Haram killed two Christians, burned houses, and vandalized shops in incidents in Kuburumbula and Boftari, Borno State in September. The group also burned seven houses and vandalized shops. Boko Haram tied up and killed one of

the men in front of his family. On September 18, Boko Haram shot and killed eight Christians as they left a Sunday church service in Kwamjilari village in Borno State.

Most captives of past Boko Haram kidnappings of women and girls for purposes of forced marriage or sexual exploitation remained unaccounted for. In August Boko Haram released a video showing at least 50 of the 200 girls kidnapped from a secondary school in Chibok, Borno State in 2014; the group demanded the release of captured Boko Haram fighters in exchange for the kidnapped girls, some of whom it said had been killed in airstrikes and 40 of whom had been married. *The New York Times* reported in October that the government secured the release of 21 of the girls and quoted a government official who denied Boko Haram fighters were released in exchange for the girls.

Tens of thousands of refugees remained in neighboring countries after having fled the violence in the northeast, and more than 1.7 million people remained internally displaced.

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

There were incidents of killings and other religiously motivated violence, including between Christian farmers and Fulani Muslim herdsmen. Churches and mosques hired private security or took additional security measures in response to attacks and bombings. Religious leaders generally spoke out against violence and urged their followers to live peaceably. Muslim and Christian leaders reported a lack of trust between Muslims and Christians.

Between February 22 and 29, Fulani Muslim herdsmen attacked the predominantly Christian Agatu community in Benue, killing over 300 people and burning churches and mosques in the villages. The Fulani said the attacks were retaliation for the killing of 10,000 of their cattle. There were no arrests. After negotiations between the Agatu and Fulani leaders in March, the Fulani left the area.

In October media reported gunmen believed to be Fulani herdsmen killed 40 people in Godogodo, Kaduna State. In retaliation, media reported Christians stopped two buses traveling from Plateau State to Kaduna State, removed the Fulani herdsmen passengers, and killed 14 of them, burning the bodies. According to MACBAN, the attacks in Godogodo began with a clash between two Fulani herdsmen and a Christian farmer. MACBAN said the herdsmen's cattle destroyed the farmer's crops, which the herdsmen said were on a cattle-grazing route. After

the fight, the farmer was hospitalized after receiving a nonfatal machete blow to the head. Upon hearing the news, local Christian youth attacked the Fulani settlement and burned several homes. The leader of the Fulani settlement, on his way to request assistance from local authorities, was killed and his body burned.

In a raid that lasted several hours on November 15, suspected armed Fulani herdsmen killed 42 persons and burned down 49 houses in several villages in Kaura, Kaduna State. The attack was purportedly in response to the killing of 19 head of cattle a few weeks earlier. The Southern Kaduna People's Union reported an attack by Fulani herdsmen just outside of Kafanchan, Kaduna on December 24 and 25, resulting in 16 deaths. The herdsmen carried out the attack during a 24-hour curfew imposed by the Kaduna State Government after Christians took to the streets to protest the lack of security in the region. The police and army significantly increased their presence in the region in response to the attacks.

NGOs cited a number of contributing factors for the increase of clashes between Muslim Fulani herders and Christian farmers, namely the shrinking of formerly shared resources caused by desertification and soil erosion, population growth, and banditry and violence in the north that caused herders to move further south into lands predominantly populated by Christians. Because of the close links among religion, ethnicity, and political and economic interests, it was difficult to categorize many of these incidents as based solely on religious identity.

There were several incidents of mob violence related to allegations of blasphemy. On May 29, a mob in Pandogari, Niger State killed a Christian man for allegedly posting blasphemous statements against Islam on a social media network. After the incident, riots broke out in the area, resulting in three other deaths, a number of injuries, and the destruction of a church. The military and police intervened to reestablish order and arrested 32 individuals. On June 2, assailants killed a Christian vendor originally from southeast Nigeria in Kofar Wambai Market in Kano City after she attempted to prevent a Muslim from performing *Wudu*, ritual cleansing before prayer, in front of her shop. The killing was condemned by President Buhari, the country's senate, the chairman of the CAN, and the Sultan of Sokoto. Five individuals were arrested, but, on November 3, a magistrate court dismissed the case and released them after State Attorney General Haruna Falali announced the state had no case. He declared the men innocent and instructed the court to release them.

On August 22, a group of Muslim students at Abdu Gusau Polytechnic in Zamfara State reportedly burned down the home of a Muslim student, killing eight Muslims

trapped inside. The group accused the Muslim student of assisting a Christian student whom the group had beaten for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad. The NGO International Christian Concern reported that the Christian student was hospitalized after his beating and that the group of Muslim students also vandalized various Christian establishments on campus and several churches. There were no reports of arrests.

In Benue State, according to the NGO Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), unknown assailants abducted three Catholic clergymen and held them for ransom. One of the priests, Father John Adeyi, was found dead in June behind the Otukpa secretariat building after his kidnapping in April. CSW stated he might have died because he could not access his asthma medication. His death came after his family paid 2 million naira (\$6,600) for his release. CSW reported the remains of another priest, the Reverend Iliya Anto, were found in Kaduna State, nine days after he and the two other clergymen had been abducted. In November an Islamic cleric was kidnapped in Kaduna and released after two days. It was not known whether the requested 60 million naira (\$198,000) ransom was paid. Kidnapping for ransom was common throughout the country, and there was no evidence the religion of the victims was a factor in these cases.

On June 7, Muslim youths stabbed a Christian man in Kaduna for eating during Ramadan. The man survived. There were no reported arrests.

Many religious leaders publicly supported tolerance and interfaith methods of conflict resolution. For example, on August 19, Muslim and Christian religious leaders inaugurated the International Center for Interfaith Peace and Harmony in Kaduna. The center was to serve as an interfaith platform to discuss and advocate for policies that would promote peace between the two faiths.

Muslim leaders regularly publicly condemned the activities of Boko Haram as un-Islamic and disassociated themselves from the ideology and actions of the group. According to local press, Sultan of Sokoto and President-General of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs Sa'ad Abubakar III warned against violence and forced conversion to Islam, stating, "We do not force anybody to join Islam. Those who do not want to come as Muslims are free to stay with us and continue working with us to make this country a much better place."

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

U.S. embassy staff promoted religious freedom and tolerance in discussions throughout the year with government officials, such as the national security advisor, chief of army staff, and minister of foreign relations. After the November clashes in Kano State between security forces and the IMN in which an indeterminate number of IMN members died, a senior embassy official met with the governor of Kaduna and the inspector general of police to encourage restraint by security forces. Embassy representatives met with civil society and religious leaders, such as the Sultan of Sokoto, the president of CAN, and the Archbishop of Abuja, to understand their concerns and to stress the importance of interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and promoting religious freedom. The embassy also cosponsored anticorruption workshops in Lagos and Kano for Muslim and Christian religious leaders, where it highlighted the importance of working across faiths and respecting the freedom of religion in order to effectively fight corruption.

During his August 23-24 visit, the U.S. Secretary of State met with the Sultan of Sokoto and Anglican Bishop Augustine Omole, as well as other Christian and Muslim leaders, to encourage interfaith dialogue to address shared challenges and efforts to counter violent extremism. On October 17-19, the U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities visited Abuja and Kano and gave press interviews across multiple platforms to highlight the importance of religious freedom in religiously diverse democracies like Nigeria.

In a May visit to Abuja for a regional security summit, the Deputy Secretary of State met with Nigerian political leaders to discuss human rights concerns, and reiterated the United States' commitment to support the fight against Boko Haram and called for a sustained and comprehensive approach to address its root causes.

In an April visit, the U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN and the Ambassador met with President Buhari and with political, humanitarian, and religious leaders to discuss efforts to combat Boko Haram and deal with the impact of the group's abuses, reaffirming U.S. support for those efforts. In meetings with Christian and Muslim religious leaders, they discussed ways of rebuilding and strengthening trust between the two religious groups and of combating radicalization and extremism.

In a visit to Abuja and Jos in February, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom engaged a wide spectrum of religious leaders, identifying issues for embassy advocacy and reiterating U.S. government support for religious freedom. He reiterated to government officials the importance of

holding perpetrators of violence responsible, addressing security concerns of religious communities, and eliminating religiously motivated discrimination and abuses. In Plateau State, the Ambassador advocated for the importance of religious freedom and the need for officials to address the drivers of religious conflict in the state. He also met with community leaders and NGOs working on conflict resolution to discuss the successes in alleviating tensions between different ethnic and religious groups.

The U.S. Consul General in Lagos continued to discuss religious tolerance and interfaith relationship building with religious leaders from all faiths in the country. The consulate general also cosponsored an event to reinforce countering violent extremism messaging from academic, religious, and humanitarian perspectives.