



THE BARONESS COX
HOUSE OF LORDS
LONDON SW1A 0PW

Vicky Ford MP
Minister for Africa
House of Commons

28 January 2022

Dear Vicky,

I and many others remain deeply alarmed by the continuation of communal violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt, often characterised as the 'farmer-herder conflict'.

The violence has escalated since 2015 and has manifested increasingly along religious lines, as the herders are predominantly ethnic Fulani Muslims and the farmers are predominantly Christians. The exact death toll since 2015 is unknown. However, thousands of civilians are known to have been killed in attacks led by Fulani herders and periodic retaliatory violence.

According to new research by Christian Solidarity International, at least 615 people were killed by 'bandits, herdsman, gunmen and Fulani militants' in the first three weeks of 2022. Approximately 13,050 Nigerians were displaced from their homes due to the violence.

Drivers of communal violence

- There are multiple drivers of communal violence; causes of violence are specific to the local area's history, politics, ethno-linguistic make-up and resource competition.
- The escalation of violence must also be seen in the context of the growth of Islamist extremism across the Sahel. Some Fulani herders, often described as Fulani militia, subscribe to such an ideology.¹

A sample of evidence that extremist ideology is a driver of communal violence

- During many of the attacks, Fulani militia are reported by survivors to have shouted 'Allahu Akbar', 'destroy the infidels' and 'wipe out the infidels.' Armed with sophisticated weaponry, they destroy homes and churches and seize property and land, which has resulted in mass displacement. The attacks are organised and systematic. All such findings are recorded in the 2020 report, *Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?*, by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- The Bishop of Truro's 2019 Review, whose recommendations the UK Government agreed to implement in full, describes perpetrators of atrocities as "militant Fulani Islamist herdsman" and concludes: "Fulani attacks have repeatedly demonstrated a clear intent to target Christians, and potent symbols of Christian identity."

- In December 2020, the US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, Sam Brownback, explained why the US State Department designated Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern: "...a number of terrorist groups are [organising] and pushing into the country... it's often the religious affiliation [that] is used to try to recruit and inspire violent acts."
- According to the Global Terrorism Index 2019, published by the Institute for Economics and Peace: "In Nigeria, terrorist activity is dominated by Fulani extremists and Boko Haram. Together, they account for 78 per cent of terror-related incidents and 86 per cent of deaths from terrorism." The report also suggests that extremist Islamist groups such as the Front de Libération du Macina in Mali have built on underlying grievances between farmers and herders in Nigeria and recruited susceptible members of the Fulani ethnic group through the use of ethno-religious narratives.
- Similar concerns are raised by Jamestown Foundation's report, 'Alleged Connection between Boko Haram and Nigeria's Fulani Herdsmen Could Spark a Nigerian Civil War', published in Terrorism Monitor: "If Boko Haram is to succeed in its goal of establishing a Salafist caliphate in northern Nigeria, it must expand its base beyond the Kanuri community. The Fulani herders are already well-armed and engaged in a bitter struggle with the Christian and non-Salafist Muslim agricultural communities of Nigeria, making expansion into the aggrieved Fulani communities an excellent place to start the necessary broadening of Boko Haram's base."
- A paper by Bolaji Omitola presented at the 2014 Institute of Security Studies Conference on Crime and Crime Reduction similarly outlines the complicity between Boko Haram elements, Fulani militia and other terror or criminal groups, which accounts for the intensity and recurrence of communal violence and the state's inability to prevent them.
- Nigerian security forces have also claimed that some Fulani militia are composed of members of Boko Haram. For example, after a series of killings and arson attacks in Taraba State, the Nigerian Director of Defence Information Major General Chris Olukolade said so-called Fulani militia were arrested, interrogated and identified as Boko Haram.
- 'Governing Ungoverned Spaces in the Foliage of Conspiracy', published in African Security (February 2020), examines whether radical jihadist and non-jihadist movements and criminal-armed groups are ideologically driven by localism and informal networks, particularly in areas neglected by the state. It analyses the Boko Haram insurgency and Fulani militancy/banditry within these ungoverned spaces, and why these spaces continuously breed terrorist organisations.
- In an article published by Brookings in February 2021, Oluwole Ojewale of the Institute for Security Studies in Senegal concluded that due to porous borders, poor governance and other factors, north-west Nigeria (including Kaduna state) is now a 'safe haven' for 'increasingly active terrorist groups, including the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS); Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM); Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb; ... the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP); and the Fulani herdsmen of West Africa."

- Further evidence is widely available detailing the development links between terrorist factions in the north-east and armed groups primarily of Fulani ethnicity in north-western states and the Middle Belt.

UK Government response

While the UK Government has committed to “continue to look at ways to address” the complex drivers of communal violence in the Middle Belt, it remains unclear whether this includes addressing extremist Islamist ideology. Despite the evidence (above), your predecessor James Duddridge said in September that he is “not aware of any substantiated evidence that extremist Islamist ideology is a driver of intercommunal attacks”.

There is an urgent need for the UK Government to re-consider its characterisation of the violence and to confront the destructive power of extremist ideology, which is instrumentalised to recruit or inspire violent acts. Given the scale of attacks and consequent mass displacement of civilians, there is also an urgent need for the UK to allocate humanitarian aid to the Middle Belt, in addition to UK aid to the north-east.

Yours sincerely,



Baroness Cox

Independent Member of the House of Lords

Founder President, Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART)

ⁱ I recognise the important distinction between the Fulani in general (a diverse group of more than 20 million people with hundreds of clans) and the sub-group of radicalised Fulani who carry out attacks. The term ‘Fulani militia’ is used to describe trained, well-armed men of Fulani ethnicity who launch attacks in the Middle Belt – as distinct from Fulani bandits in the north-west (who mainly attack Hausa Muslim communities) and Fulani in the north (many of whom are victims of attacks by Boko Haram). Large numbers of Fulani reside peaceably alongside Christian communities of differing ethnicities across the Middle Belt, including in Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau and southern Kaduna states.