

By Tamara Winter - - Wednesday, January 16, 2019

**ANALYSIS/OPINION:**

Last month, [Amnesty International](https://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/amnesty-international/) released a new report that outlined the costs of a dangerous and often deadly cycle of violence occurring in [Nigeria](https://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/nigeria/)’s Middle Belt region between Christian farmers and Muslim herders — 3,600 people have been killed in the past 3 years, with 2018 being the worst year on record so far.

The [Amnesty](https://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/amnesty-international/) report is the latest warning that the situation in the Middle Belt is worsening. These concerns have been echoed by others from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to the U.K.’s Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, chaired by Baroness Caroline Cox, and local Nigerian religious organizations such as the Saint Raphael’s Society of Nigeria. Ahead of Nigerian elections in February, which have the potential to cause further divisions, the Trump administration has now begun to acknowledge the scale of the problem.

The administration recently designated Boko Haram an Entity of Particular Concern, a designation for non-state entities engaging in severe religious freedom abuses. This is a necessary, but not enough to end sectarian violence in [Nigeria](https://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/nigeria/)’s troubled regions.

The Nigerian government has undoubtedly made progress, quelling Boko Haram’s ambitions for territorial expansion by limiting the group’s active presence to small villages across the countryside. However, in November the government suffered a major setback when members of one Boko Haram faction overran a military base, killing over 100 Nigerian soldiers and leaving an untold number of additional troops missing.

The focus on Boko Haram — both in Washington D.C. and in Abuja — risks leaving the wider religious conflict in [Nigeria](https://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/nigeria/) unaddressed. The reality on the ground is Christians in the Middle Belt face persecution, violence, intimidation and, increasingly, death.

As the U.K. aid group, Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART), has documented, “the asymmetry and escalation of attacks by well-armed Fulani upon predominately Christian communities is stark and must be acknowledged.”

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has also weighed in, urging the U.S. State Department to designate [Nigeria](https://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/nigeria/) as a Country of Particular Concern, as recently as this December.

Yet, the Trump administration did not do so, and instead selected countries including Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Pakistan for the designation. [Nigeria](https://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/nigeria/)’s Christians deserve a similar level of attention.

The need to act was highlighted in a recent congressional hearing in which Rep. Chris Smith noted the “apparent inability, perhaps even reluctance, of the Nigerian Federal Government under President Buhari to stop the violence, or to condemn the attacks”

Rep. Ron Estes further exposed the gravity of the situation on the ground, lamenting that “Sadly, Christians in [Nigeria](https://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/nigeria/) are under fire in what many are calling a genocide.”

The Economist magazine similarly concludes that the slaughter of Christians can be defined as the early signs of genocide: “Fighting in the Central African Republic was seen as the “early signs of genocide” by the UN in 2017. The term has also been applied to the bloodbath in South Sudan, the depredations of Bashar Assad in Syria and Islamist attacks on Christians in [Nigeria](https://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/nigeria/)’s middle belt.” This is the scale of the crisis.

As President Trump adopts a more muscular strategy for Africa, the warning from Reps. Estes and Smith, and others around the world, cannot be ignored. It is time for the U.S. government, and Secretary Pompeo, to classify [Nigeria](https://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/nigeria/) as a Country of Particular Concern.

Yet, a designation from America alone will not be enough. Nigerian Christians need action from President Buhari, who has the power, using the strength of the Nigerian military to end their suffering. Pressure from Washington D.C. is an essential step to accomplish this.

*• Tamara Winter was born in Lagos,* [*Nigeria*](https://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/nigeria/)*, but now lives in Arlington, Va. She serves as the operations lead at the Center for Innovative Governance Research.*