



Report to the United Nations General Assembly: Eliminating Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief and the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16

About HART

1.1 Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART) is a UK-based NGO, established in 2004 to support communities suffering conflict and persecution in places with no international media attention and who are generally not served by major aid organisations. We believe that, in order to meet their needs, the management of humanitarian assistance must primarily involve local people.

1.2 The evidence below is based on first-hand evidence of human rights violations. It reflects the concerns and priorities of our partners in Nigeria, Sudan, Burma and Syria – all of whom suffer intolerance and discrimination because of their religion or beliefs.

Examples and effects of persecution

(2) Nigeria: Strategic land-grabbing and the permanent displacement of Christian communities

2.1 The reign of terror inflicted by Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province is well documented. Less well known is the escalation of attacks by Islamist Fulani herders against predominantly Christian communities in northern and central-belt states.

2.2 Some of the worst-affected areas include Benue, Plateau, Taraba, Adamawa, Kaduna, Kwara, Borno and Zamfara. On 4 July 2018, the Nigerian House of Representatives declared killings in Plateau State to be a genocide and called on the Federal Government to establish orphanages in areas affected by violence.

2.3 The underlying drivers of conflict are complex. Yet targeted violence against Christians and symbols of Christian identity suggests that religion and ideology play a key part – as emphasised in the Bishop of Truro’s report for the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office.¹ Christian pastors and community heads are specifically targeted. During many of the attacks, herders are reported by survivors to have shouted ‘Allah u Akbar’ and ‘destroy the infidels’. Hundreds of churches have been destroyed, including over 500 churches in Benue State.²

¹ The Bishop of Truro’s Independent Review for the UK Foreign Secretary of Foreign and Commonwealth Office Support for Persecuted Christians, 2019, page 32

² CSW, ‘Nigeria sees 106 attacks by Herder Militia in Central States’, 25 June 2018, see <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/06/25/press/4011/article.htm> as at 22 May 2020

2.4 The exact death toll is unknown. However, thousands of civilians are thought to have been killed in Fulani attacks and periodic retaliatory violence.³ International Crisis Group estimate that over 300,000 people have been displaced as a result of the farmer-herder conflict.⁴

2.5 The Anglican Bishop of Bauchi, Musa Mwin Tula, represents many of the worst affected areas. He told us: “The conflict between herdsmen and farmers has existed for a long time. But the menace in recent times has jumped from a worrisome itch in the north to a cancerous disease, spreading throughout the country, claiming lives and threatening to spiral into a monster.”⁵

2.6 We visited four Christian farming villages that had been attacked in the Ropp district, Plateau State, during which herders killed 21 people. One survivor said: “They were trained terrorists with guns. They killed those who couldn’t run – the aged, the children and the blind. A pastor was their first casualty. They surrounded him. They killed him and then they rejoiced, shouting ‘Allah u Akbar’ and ‘we have got a hero’.”⁶

2.7 Describing a similar attack in Ngar village, a survivor called Margaret said: “[My sister] was raped and her wrists cut off before she was shot through the heart. They took my brother, his wife and all their six children, tied and slaughtered them like animals. 18 people were killed in the house that day, the rest were all burnt alive.”⁷

2.8 Veronica, from Dogon Noma, told us: “We tried to run. But we were surrounded... [A] man attacked me with a machete twice, once to the neck and once to my hand. I was so confused. I lost consciousness. When I woke up, I saw my daughter on ground – she was dead – with my chopped finger in her mouth.”⁸

2.9 Community leaders from North Maiduguri, Borno, said: “They focus their attacks on Christians. It is part of their Islamist agenda to eliminate us. They target Christian soldiers – every day we carry new corpses to the cemetery. They destroy our homes and churches. They kidnap and rape women. Some women are forced to marry Muslims. Persecution is real here. We are targeted because of our faith.”⁹

(3) Sudan: Attacks against Muslims, Christians and traditional believers

3.1 The Sudanese people have experienced near-constant conflict and instability over six decades of independence. Under Omar al-Bashir’s leadership, the former Government targeted civilians with aerial bombardment, missile attacks and ground offensives. Assaults were directed at schools, mosques, churches and marketplaces, targeting indigenous Africans,

³ According to Amnesty International, at least 3,641 people may have been killed, 406 injured and 5,000 houses burnt down between January 2016 and October 2018. Local groups, such as the Christian Association of Nigeria, report much higher figures: over 6,000 deaths between January and June 2018.

⁴ International Crisis Group, ‘Stopping Nigeria’s Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence’, Africa Report No. 262, 26 July 2018, page 12

⁵ Cox C, ‘An Insurgency of Terror: The Crisis Facing Christians in Nigeria’, November 2016, page 2

⁶ *Ibid*, page 5

⁷ HART Visit Report, *Hidden Atrocities: The Escalating Persecution and Displacement of Christians in Northern and Central Nigeria*, November 2018, pages 3-4

⁸ HART Visit Report, *Your Land or Your Blood: The Escalating Persecution and Displacement of Christians in Northern and Central Nigeria*, November 2019, pages 3-4

⁹ *Ibid*, page 10

Christians, traditional believers and Muslims who did not subscribe to the regime's hardline ideology.

3.2 Such genocidal policies in South Kordofan and Blue Nile (The Two Areas) and Darfur – already well documented – reflected the then President's avowed commitment to turn Sudan into an Arabic, Islamic nation and to ensure "liberation from these insects and to get rid of them once and for all."¹⁰ His military regime was responsible for three million deaths and five million displaced.

3.3 As Sodi Shamila, Director of Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, told us in 2018: "They destroy our mosques, churches, schools. Why is the Government of Sudan killing us? Because we're black or different Muslims or we have our own culture? We don't understand. In Blue Nile, there are so many Muslims who are being killed."¹¹

3.4 Opposition Governor Anur Shallah, from the Nuba Mountains, shared a similar analysis in 2019: "The regime does not want to finalise peace. They prefer to deny us our rights. They want to impose only one culture and one religion."¹²

3.5 Despite al-Bashir's removal in April 2019, conflict, repression and severe human rights violations continue across the country. Senior members of the SPLM-N for the Nuba Mountains informed HART in 2019 of 32 churches that were burnt down in Sudan within a 12-month period. We have since been told of a further 40 churches that have been destroyed, though we await confirmation of this claim.

3.6 Among the new Sovereign Council, only two members are women, one of whom (Aisha Musa Saeed) is a Christian. We recognise that this is a hard-fought step in the right direction but we share widespread concerns that positions of influence remain dominated or controlled by military men.

3.7 We commend the efforts being made to ensure that the people of Sudan enjoy equality and respect for their human rights. We also acknowledge the spirit of cautious optimism across civil society, especially in relation to the establishment of an independent religious freedom commission and Ministry for Peace and Human Rights, supported by the transitional Government and SPLM-N (Malik Agar), which we hope will begin to address the violations committed against minority religious or belief communities.¹³ As Yasir Arman, Deputy Chairman of SPLM-N, told us in January 2020: "The situation is better by far better than before."¹⁴

3.8 It remains the case, however, that some of our partners continue to worry about the risk of isolated attacks. They have concerns over in-country debates surrounding the imposition of Sharia law and have expressed doubts over whether military and political officials associated

¹⁰ *BBC News Online*, 19 April 2012

¹¹ HART Visit Report, *'There was nobody to help us': Oppression by the Government of Sudan and Food Shortages in Blue Nile, Sudan*, January 2018, page 7

¹² HART Visit Report, *Hope in Suffering: South Sudan and the Nuba Mountains in Sudan*, page 3

¹³ CSW, *Government Agrees to Create a National Commission for Religious Freedom*, 22 May 2020, see <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020/05/22/press/4673/article.htm> as at 28 May 2020; Press Release, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, USCIRF Delegation Travels to Sudan to Assess Post-Revolution Progress toward Greater Religious Freedom, 2 March 2020

¹⁴ HART Visit Report, *'There was no one to protect us': Abyei, Sudan and South Sudan*, January 2020, page 2

with the former regime will prove trustworthy partners – particularly given their history of repression and violence.

(4) Burma: persecution of Muslim Rohingya, Buddhist Shan and Christian Kachin peoples

4.1 Throughout decades of civil war, Burma’s ruling military regime has inflicted systematic oppression in many regions belonging to ethnic nationals, including the predominantly Muslim Rohingya, Buddhist Shan and Christian Kachin peoples.

4.2 As a result of the conflict between Arakan Army and the Burmese army in Southern Chin State, close to Lailenpi and Northern Rakhine State, 37 Chin villagers have reportedly been killed by military jets, several Chin villagers are missing, 12,000 Chin villagers have been forced to flee to nearby IDP camps and approximately 60,000 Chin villagers remain stuck under last year’s curfew and restrictions, all of whom require urgent humanitarian assistance.

4.3 Five pastors have been arrested and face three years in Insein prison in Yangon for breaking social-religious curfews / physical-distancing directives, despite holding prayers at home and not in a Church. In April 2020, 12 Muslims were arrested in Mandalay and sentenced to three months in prison for holding prayers at home. Hundreds of others, including children and migrant workers, have received similar prison sentences.¹⁵ In an urgent statement from one of our local partners, we were told on 28 May 2020: “The inequality before the law, injustices and discrimination against the ethnic minorities and minorities of religious belief are not new but this time are much more devastating... the powerful majority are living above the law, at the same time they are using these laws to oppress the minorities whom they have already oppressed and persecuted so much for so long.”

4.4 In Northern Shan State, armed attacks escalated in mid-August 2019 between the Brotherhood Alliance of Ethnic Armed Groups¹⁶ and the Burmese army by use of heavy artilleries and explosion of landmines in Kyaukme, Nam San, Hsipaw, Kutkai, Lashio townships and along Pyi Htaung Su main road, which are in close proximity to civilians.¹⁷ In April 2020, the military bombed villages in Paletwa Township in Chin State, killing civilians and destroying homes and churches. There are also reports of escalating attacks against the majority-Buddhist Rakhine peoples.¹⁸

4.5 The consequential displacement of civilians adds to the over 240,000 already internally displaced by violence, of which three quarters are women and children. Many remain trapped by the military in conflict areas, forced to seek shelter in nearby forests and without access to food, water or medical supplies.

4.6 HART welcomes the announcement of a four-month ceasefire by the military from 10 May until 31 August in order to contain and prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, we understand that the ceasefire does not apply to Rakhine and Chin States, where the conflict is

¹⁵ *Human Rights Watch*, ‘Myanmar: Hundreds Jailed for Covid-19 Violations,’ 28 May 2020, see <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/28/myanmar-hundreds-jailed-covid-19-violations> as at 29 May 2020

¹⁶ Ta’ang National Liberation Army, Arakan Army and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army

¹⁷ Urgent Statement on Intensified Conflicts in Northern Shan State, signed by 131 organisations, 16 November 2019

¹⁸ Such cases do not represent the totality of military conflict or human rights abuses in Burma; they provide a snapshot of conflict areas.

most intense. Even in ethnic areas where a ceasefire has been in place for almost a decade, ethnic and religious tensions prevail.

4.7 The suffering inflicted by military offensives is exacerbated by frequent violations of human rights and crimes against humanity, with reports of extrajudicial killings, sexual violence and torture. Interviews with internally displaced peoples in Shan camps tell of horrific stories of civilians beaten and used as forced labour by the military, farms taken from villagers and children recruited by the military. The Shan Human Rights Foundation reports arbitrary arrests¹⁹ and Amnesty International found treatment of ethnic minorities in Shan and Kachin states similar to that of the Rohingya.²⁰ We have also seen reports of extortion, of villages being levelled to make space for hydro projects along the rivers and land-grabbing for the expansion of mining and hydro projects.

(5) Syria: Islamist extremism

5.1 There are many different layers to the conflict in Syria, including fighting between Government and opposition forces, struggles between Kurds and Turks, and proxy wars involving other nations. Atrocities have been committed on all sides. The crisis remains one of the worst humanitarian disasters of our time, resulting in massive internal displacement and outflow of refugees, affecting people of many ethnicities and religions.

5.2 As the civil war enters its tenth year, the overwhelming priority of the Syrian people is the elimination of Islamist extremists, who have perpetrated genocidal policies and atrocities on an immense scale – including abductions into sexual slavery, torture, burning civilians alive, beheadings and desecration of holy sites – and who continue to attack areas under the Syrian Government’s control, targeting especially Christian-majority towns and villages.

5.3 It is well documented that the majority of armed opposition forces are now dominated by jihadist militants with no intention of creating democracy in Syria. They would readily dismantle the broadly secular constitution in which most Syrians take pride and end the country’s long history of Christian-Muslim coexistence.

5.4 The historic Christian town of Maaloula was captured by Jabhat al-Nusra in September 2013 and subsequently liberated by the Syrian Army in April 2014. Under jihadist control, militants undertook widespread desecration of holy sites and destruction of buildings. On the first day of the attack, 29 local people were killed, including three civilians who refused to convert to Islam. Six men were kidnapped, five of whom were later found dead, with evidence of torture.

5.5 The town’s most popular four-star Safir Hotel was obliterated. Situated at the top of the hill, it proved a strategic stronghold for Islamist fighters. The same fighters occupied nearby ancient monasteries, smashing altars, stealing relics and burning crosses.

5.6 Upon our most recent visit to Maaloula, we met two women, Marie Shaheen and Zakia Kasis, who are helping to establish an entrepreneurial project to encourage residents to return.

¹⁹ See for example: *SHRF*, ‘Ongoing torture, killing, arbitrary arrests during midnight raids by Burma Army in Ho Pong township’, 21 September 2017, see <https://www.shanhumanrights.org/eng/index.php/335-ongoing-torture-killing-arbitrary-arrests-during-midnight-raids-by-burma-army-in-ho-pong-township> as at 22 May 2020

²⁰ See for example: Amnesty International, ‘*Caught in the Middle*’: *Abuses Against Civilians amid Conflict in Myanmar’s Northern Shan State*, 2019, pages 15 and 44

They told us: “We were in the village when the war started. We had to flee and could not return for eight months. When we returned, we found al-Nusra had stolen everything and destroyed homes and churches. Our homes were burnt and we were left with nothing.”²¹

5.7 Elsewhere in 2012, the historic Christian town of Saindaya was attacked by 2000-3000 Islamist militants with tanks and advanced weaponry. Up to 300 local people formed an *ad hoc* popular committee in response to the attack, 30 of whom were killed. After three days of intense conflict, the committee repelled the attack and prevented a jihadist occupation.

Examples of good practice

6.1 *Nigeria*: The Mai Adiko Reconciliation Project in Rayfield, Jos, coordinated by Revd. Canon Hassan John, was established to build positive relationships between Muslims and Christians. Women from each community come together to share various skills, develop friendships and heal rifts caused by inter-communal violence. Nearly 200 women were involved in the project in 2019. Similar, appropriately adapted programmes, have been established for young men.

6.2 *Nigeria*: Ningi Interfaith School in Bauchi State is a ‘beacon within its community’, promoting positive relationships between Muslim and Christian pupils, staff and trustees. The school began as a Christian foundation, founded by the Bauchi diocese twenty years ago. It has since developed as having a majority Muslim demographic.

6.3 *Sudan*: The Nuba Relief, Rehabilitation and Development Organisation is a community-based organisation that carries out humanitarian projects across the Nuba Mountains, such as emergency relief, education, food security, peace-building, the promotion of gender equality and the provision of primary healthcare. Their vision is of “a just and equitable society in which all the people of Southern Kordofan/Nuba Mountains live a dignified life.”

6.4 *Sudan*: South Kordofan State and the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) organises humanitarian projects in Blue Nile and in refugee camps in South Sudan. HART works with NSCC to supply community health centres with essential medicines, which are delivered by trained health workers.

6.5 *Burma*: Shan’s Women Action Network (SWAN) promotes gender equality and justice for Shan women through community-based actions, a women’s empowerment programme, an education programme and an income-generation programme. SWAN is a founding member of the Women’s League of Burma, an umbrella women’s organisation comprising 13 women’s groups.

6.6 *Burma*: The Chin National Union was formed on 23 May 2020 to provide humanitarian assistance to Chin refugees in Southern Chin State and Rakhine State, as well as Chin refugees in Malaysia and Delhi.

6.7 *Syria*: One cannot condone atrocities committed by the Assad regime. Yet for all its faults, the Syrian Government has the best record in the region for protecting the rights of women,

²¹ Cox C and Thomas D, *Voices from Syria: A Pastoral Visit to Damascus, Saindaya, Maaloula, Homs and Aleppo*, April 2018, page 14

Christians, Shia, Alawites, Druze and other religious minorities – as emphasised recently by two former British Ambassadors to Syria.²²

6.8 *Syria*: Since 2003, the St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee (EPDC) has worked under the supervision of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch to provide the means for people living in poverty to increase their capacity-building and to improve their living conditions. In April 2018, HART began a partnership with EPDC to help empower Maaloula women to combat food insecurity in their communities.

29 MAY 2020

The Baroness Cox
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²² Letter to James Cleverly MP, UK Minister for Middle East and North Africa, 11 May 2020, signed by: Lord Green of Deddington (British Ambassador to Syria 1991-94); Peter Ford (British Ambassador to Syria 2003-06); Baroness Cox; Lord West of Spithead; Lord Carey of Clifton; Lord Hylton; Lord Alderdice; Lord Stoddart of Swindon; Revd Dr Andrew Ashdown Dr Audrey Wells; Dr John Eibner; and Dr Michael Langrish.