

Promotion of freedom of religion or belief at the national and local level. Response to the call for input from Nazila Ghanea, the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB.

Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART) is an international development charity and member of the UK FoRB Forum. We partner with local peacebuilders and humanitarian organisations in Nigeria, Syria, Burma, Sudan, South Sudan and the disputed territories of Abyei and Nagorno Karabakh.

1. Summary

1.1 The task of ensuring respect of human rights often falls on citizens and NGOs – not national or local elected representatives. Greater weight should be given to their insights.

2. Case study: Nigeria

2.1 Fulani militia attacks continue to escalate in Nigeria's Middle Belt.¹ An estimated 16,000-22,000 killings have occurred since 2009, including at least 3,000 in the previous 12 months.² Countless others have suffered life-changing injuries.

2.2 The violence has displaced millions and appears designed to reduce the number of indigenous Christians in the region. Inasmuch as the attacks are intended to destroy ethno-religious communities, they may rise to the level of ethnic cleansing or even genocide.³

2.3 There are multiple drivers of violence in the Middle Belt; some are specific to the region's history, politics, ethno-linguistic make-up and competition for resources.

2.4 Local experts claim that religious tensions between Christians and Muslims constitute a significantly exacerbating factor.⁴ Relations between the two religious communities have deteriorated dramatically in recent times. Spaces where Christians and Muslims live together have decreased, both in cities like Jos and in the countryside.

2.5 In response to urgent concerns raised by local experts, many international observers prefer not to speak about the Christian-Muslim dimension. They worry that identifying religious

¹ The term 'Fulani militia' is used to describe well-armed groups composed of men of Fulani ethnicity who carry out attacks in the Middle Belt. They are distinct from so-called 'Fulani bandits' in the northwest, who mainly attack Hausa Muslim communities, and Fulani in the northeast, many of whom are victims of attacks by Boko Haram. Fulani militia comprise only a tiny portion of the Fulani ethnic group, a diverse group of more than 20 million people with hundreds of clans spread across several countries.

² Figures relate to attacks by Fulani militia only (i.e. not Boko Haram or ISWAP) and are collated by Nigerian human rights groups Stefanos Foundation, Intersociety and the International Organisation for Peace Building and Social Justice.

³ *'Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?'* An Inquiry by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, June 2020; *'Breaking Point in Central Nigeria: Terror and Mass Displacement in the Middle Belt'*, HART-PSJ-CSI Joint Visit Report, March 2022

⁴ Local experts include witnesses to atrocities, emergency first-responders, NGOs, religious leaders, community leaders, journalists and academics. Their claims are supported by statements from the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Religious Freedom or Belief, the US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, and by the UK Government-commissioned Review of Christian Persecution.

motivations behind the violence will become a “self-fulfilling prophesy”.⁵ We disagree strongly. Religious tensions preceded the current manifestation of violence in the Middle Belt. Individuals and communities have been targeted on account of their beliefs for decades, especially in Kaduna and Kano states.

2.6 International observers nevertheless opt to emphasise other drivers of conflict; they downplay the possible impact of religious sectarianism. For example, it was not until May 2019 – five years after Fulani militia attacks began – that the UK Government acknowledged for the first time that “religion is a factor”. It was not until August 2022 – eight years after Fulani militia attacks began – that the UK Government admitted to “following reporting which suggests targeted violence against Christians is increasing”.

2.7 Attempts to downplay local insights and the strong religious factor fuelling the conflict are seriously problematic. Resources have been wasted on the discussion and implementation of solutions based on premises that have little impact on the violence. Meanwhile, thousands of killings have occurred.

3. The role of domestic law enforcement and justice authorities in relation to FoRB

3.1 The Nigerian Government has been unable to stop the violence. It has failed to ensure justice or recompense for victims, including villagers who attempt to return to their farms. During our most recent visit, we heard that people who try to reclaim their land cannot withstand the gunfire from Fulani militia.⁶ Perpetrators of these attacks are rarely, if ever, brought to justice by Nigerian authorities.

3.2 The State’s failure to protect its citizens is not necessarily due to a lack of resources in the Middle Belt but a lack of willingness to engage. In the areas of all the attack sites we visited in Plateau and Kaduna states, the army presence was visible. On the main roads to and from each community, we encountered multiple manned checkpoints and armed vehicles, and sometimes full army bases. Yet we consistently heard that, even though villagers called the army for help during attacks, soldiers arrived only after the attack had taken place.

3.3 HART’s local partner, Hassan John, coordinates aid programmes among many of the worst-affected communities. Following an attack on three villages on Tuesday 16 May 2023 in Mangu, Plateau state, his team sought to attend to the victims. He told us: *“Sometimes we do have police escort but most times we do not have the cooperation of security forces so we have to make our own arrangements. Those that went to help, along with the armed police, also came under gunfire. They had to retreat and waited until the place was quiet before getting to the victims.”*

3.4 Hassan John confirmed that displaced and host communities in the Middle Belt cannot rely on humanitarian assistance from state or federal authorities. Neither can they rely on help from the US or UK Government, nor any member of the European Union or African Union, nor UN relief agencies operating in Nigeria. He said: *“I can say categorically that none of these villages [that I visit across the Middle Belt] have received security or humanitarian assistance*

⁵ Letter from James Duddridge MP, the then UK Minister for Africa, 23 September 2020

⁶ We visited the following villages destroyed or damaged in attacks: Tegbe village, Miango community, Bassa Local Government Area; Jebbu village, Miango community, Bassa LGA, Plateau state; Atak-Mawe village, Kurmin Masara community, Zagon Kataf LGA, Kaduna state; Zamon Dabo village, Kurmin Masara community, Zagon Kataf LGA, Kaduna state.

from the Government of Nigeria or elsewhere. They are forced to rely on aid from local churches or small NGOs, or they receive no aid at all. After an attack, families in neighbouring villages do what they can to absorb and care for their relatives. In one room, I saw 40 people sleeping on the same floor.”

3.5 Justice authorities at both state and federal levels have acted vigorously to suppress criticism of the State’s inaction, for example:

3.5.1 Luka Binniyat, a veteran journalist and the spokesperson of the Southern Kaduna People’s Union, was arrested on 4 November 2021 following a dispute over his reporting on the massacre of 38 Christians at Madamai village. Prison conditions in Nigeria must include, according to the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, basic standards of hygiene, provision of food, access to natural light and fresh air, and recreation. According to Binniyat, the conditions in the prison where he was held did not meet these standards: *“The food in prison – I don’t think my dog would eat it. My cell had 120 men inside. We slept like sardines. We queued all night to use one toilet. The place stinks like hell. The police cells are even worse. I stayed there for six days. On average there, three people die each week, sometimes under torture. Sometimes they bring people out at night and kill them. It is hot and dark. I have met people who have almost gone blind, having spent so long in the dark. It is awful. Awful, awful, awful.”*

3.5.2 Luka Binniyat is one of many journalists and whistleblowers in Kaduna state targeted by the local administration: Midat Joseph, a reporter for the newspaper Leadership, was arrested in 2017 for comments he made in a WhatsApp group about the crisis; In 2018, a broadcast journalist named Segun Onibiyo was detained for thirty days for comments he made about the killings in southern Kaduna on social media; In September 2020, Dr Obadiah Mailafia, the former deputy governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, was interrogated by security agents and later forced into hiding after he publicly charged the Government of complicity in the attacks in Kaduna; In January 2021, the journalist Ibanga Isine was forced to flee Nigeria after he received death threats related to his investigative report about the killings in Kaduna.

3.5.3 Steven Kefas, a well-known journalist from southern Kaduna, spent 162 days in prison in 2019, after he was abducted by state agents in Port Harcourt. His offence had been writing an article about the massacres of Adara people in Kajuru LGA of Kaduna State. Like Binniyat, he suffered terribly in prison: *“In detention, I was subjected to psychological torture... I faced a myriad of health challenges after my release, including a liver illness caused by a deadly virus.”*⁷

3.6 Journalists and whistleblowers must be able to do their jobs freely and safely, without fear of reprisal, censorship or arrest. This is especially important when it comes to holding governments to account in a context of widespread human rights violations and probable atrocities.

3.7 The State’s failure to protect its citizens in the Middle Belt is a clear breach of its obligations under international law with respect to human rights. There is an urgent need to ensure adequate protection for those suffering the loss of family members and the destruction of their homes

⁷ Steven Kefas, ‘How the Kaduna State government persecutes journalists who report on genocide,’ Nigeria Report, 12 January 2022, <https://www.nigeria-report.org/commentaries-3/kefas/>

and livelihoods. The State must end impunity by ensuring that complaints related to human rights violations are promptly, independently and impartially investigated, and those responsible are held to account after fair trials.

4. Ensuring tolerance through interfaith mediation and education

4.1 In the flashpoint city of Jos, outbreaks of inter-communal violence have resulted in thousands of deaths and a deterioration in relations between Christians and Muslims. Our local partner, Women for Peace, provides a space for members of each faith group to meet and work together. The project is led by 40 women (20 Muslims and 20 Christians) who coordinate literacy classes, textiles workshops and social enterprise. Local youths are encouraged to attend reconciliation sessions, where they share experiences of suffering and solutions for peace. Women for Peace is a pillar of reconciliation in the community, embraced by local imams and pastors.

4.2 We partner with the Anglican Diocese of Jos to provide safer education and healthcare to thousands of displaced children in Plateau state and southern Kaduna. The concept of the partnership is simple: given that it is unsafe for children to travel to school or hospital, the 'Roads to Hope' vans bring school and hospital to children. The majority of beneficiaries are indigenous Christians due to the nature of the sectarian conflict and subsequent mass displacement of predominantly-Christian villages. Beneficiaries also include Fulani Muslims, including young girls, whose families are affected by communal violence.

5. Conclusion

5.1 There is a strong feeling among local people that grassroots insights are heard but ignored by policymakers. When challenges arise in relation to FoRB, citizens and NGOs are left to respond to crises on their own.

5.2 Displaced people in Nigeria's Middle Belt receive little-to-no humanitarian assistance from state or federal authorities. They are forced to rely on aid from under-resourced local churches, small NGOs, or the generosity of their extended family.

5.3 The security situation is highly volatile. The longer that domestic law enforcement authorities fail to act, the worse the ethnic and religious polarisation will become. There is an urgent need to ensure adequate protection for affected communities.

5.4 Justice authorities must end impunity by ensuring that complaints related to FoRB violations are promptly, independently and impartially investigated, and those responsible are held to account after fair trials. Journalists must be able to do their jobs freely and safely, without fear of reprisal, censorship or arrest.

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