

Legal framework

Nigeria's Federal Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion and guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief to all citizens, including the right to change religion or belief. However, the adoption of shari'a penal codes by 12 states from 2001 onwards effectively rendered Islam the state religion in those states in violation of the constitution.

Nigeria is party to international agreements that guarantee freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and non-discrimination, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). A colonial era law criminalises blasphemy, stipulating a two-year sentence. Blasphemy is also penalised under shari'a penal codes which prescribe punishments incompatible with the country's national and international obligations. In addition, blasphemy laws and allegations have been linked to severe human rights abuses that are shrouded in impunity, including extrajudicial killings and collective punishment.

Violations of the right to FoRB have occurred for many decades in the north, arising mainly from a system of marginalisation targeting minority faith communities dating back to the colonial era. A longstanding impunity surrounding religion-related violence has created an enabling environment for the regular emergence in that region of extremist religious sects with an antipathy to FoRB, including Boko Haram,¹ the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Ansaru,² the resurgent Lakurawa terrorist faction,³ and Mahmuda.⁴ A surge in violence by these factions continues to cause death, destruction and displacement in the regions where they operate. However, while the internally displaced and other victims generally receive insufficient assistance, 'repentant' terrorists responsible for their plight are rehabilitated and integrated, further depriving them of justice.

Other armed non-state actors

Violence by an irregular armed group, or militia, comprising members of Fulani ethnicity has been underway in predominantly Christian Plateau state since March 2010. Attacks on non-Muslim communities elsewhere in central Nigeria, also known as the Middlebelt, have been

ongoing since 2011, but surged exponentially in 2015, as the increasingly coordinated and well-armed militia targeted farming communities in Adamawa, Bauchi, Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau and Taraba states, and the southern part of Kaduna state.

The militia overrun farming communities, looting, burning, destroying property, forcibly displacing indigenous populations and occupying their ancestral lands. Many thousands have been killed, amid international concerns that the ongoing violations could constitute emerging atrocity crimes.⁵ In a region where ethnicity generally correlates with religion, these attacks are often described as a campaign of ethnoreligious cleansing.

Inadequate intervention to address this violence by successive governments, including allegations of complicity, and a concomitant proliferation of small arms, has caused a general rise in lawlessness which terrorist factions based in the northeast increasingly exploit. Rural banditry that targets Hausa Muslim villagers in northern Kaduna State and north-western Katsina, Kebbi, Niger, Sokoto and Zamfara States, has evolved from cattle rustling into a relentless cycle of mass killings, rape, abduction and extortion by Fulani assailants, reminiscent of violations occurring in central Nigeria. Similar violence now occurs in southern states with increasing frequency.

There is evidence of links between terrorist factions in the northeast and armed groups operating in the northwest and centre, including reports of Boko Haram fighters relocating to forests in southern Kaduna. A government gazette published in January 2022 designated non-state actors operating in northwest Nigeria, who were previously described as 'armed bandits', as 'terrorists', extending this designation to 'other similar groups' operating 'in any part of Nigeria, especially in the North-West and North-Central Regions'.⁶ This designation was reiterated by Nigeria's current president in December 2025.⁷

Kidnapping for ransom

Kidnapping for ransom is the fastest growing criminal enterprise. While recently decrying ethnic profiling,⁸ the Sultan of Sokoto State has in the past acknowledged that seven or eight of every 10 arrested kidnappers were Fulanis.⁹ Abductions for ransom are also perpetrated during militia

1 *Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wal-Jihād* (JASDJ, Group of the People of Sunnah for Dawah and Jihad), also known in the past as the Nigerian Taliban.

2 *Jamā'atu Anṣār al-Muslimīna fī Bilādīs Sūdān* (The Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa), an al-Qaeda affiliate.

3 Lakurawa is an Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) affiliate.

4 Mahmuda is reportedly linked to Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), a union of Salafi jihadi groups that includes al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and is also said to have relations with Lakurawa, and ISWAP.

5 UK Parliament, All Party Parliamentary Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Report, 'Nigeria: 'Unfolding Genocide? Three years on'', 14 August 2023 <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/report/nigeria-unfolding-genocide-three-years-on/>

6 Federal Republic of Nigeria Official Gazette No 212 Vol 108, 'Terrorism (Prevention) Proscription Order Notice', 29 November 2021 <https://thenigerialawyer.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Gazette-declaring-bandits-TheNigerialawyer.pdf>

7 Channels TV, 'Tinubu declares bandits, violent cults, armed groups as terrorists', 19 December 2025 <https://www.channelstv.com/2025/12/19/tinubu-declares-bandits-violent-cults-armed-groups-as-terrorists/>

8 National Express Newspaper, 'Sultan warns against labelling criminals as Fulani herders', 29 July 2026 <https://nationalexpress.com.ng/news/sultan-warns-against-labelling-criminals-as-fulani-herders/>

9 PM News, 'Sultan's confession: eight out of 10 kidnappers arrested are Fulanis', 30 January 2021 <https://pmnewsnigeria.com/2021/01/30/sultans-confession-eight-out-of-10-kidnappers-arrested-are-fulanis/>

attacks in central Nigeria, and particularly in Kaduna State on an almost daily basis. They are also occurring increasingly in the south. Christian leaders, their families, and congregations are particular targets, with many clergy killed, often despite ransom payments. Additionally concerning is the plight of kidnapped women and girls, unknown numbers of whom are routinely subjected to severe sexual violence.¹⁰

Since 2020 there has been a significant increase in abductions of students across Nigeria. 2024-2025 witnessed a particular spike, with around 670 children abducted in at least 10 incidents, at least 325 of them in two incidents in November 2025.¹¹ Following the United States (US) designation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) – and despite government denials – allegations persist that state and federal authorities secure releases in high-profile abductions through ransom payments and/or freeing captured terrorists, in order to appear to be making progress in tackling religion-related violations.¹²

Denial of FoRB in shari'a states

Non-Muslim communities in shari'a states face systemic and systematic marginalisation, discrimination and socioeconomic privations that predate independence and violate constitutional provisions stipulating non-discrimination. Members of Christian communities experience the denial of worship places and access to certain courses in federal educational institutions, restrictions on contesting for political positions above a certain level, deprivation of social amenities, restrictions on employment in the security sector among others, the denial of promotions, lynchings, collective punishment and impunity following blasphemy-related violence, and a lack of burial sites in state capitals. In a recent positive development, in June 2025, the government of Kebbi State responded positively to the Christian community's request for a burial site within the state capital by providing one.

In most shari'a states, the construction of churches is severely restricted. Many congregations cannot purchase land for church construction, nor obtain certificates of ownership for land purchased for this purpose. Nine churches which were destroyed in Tudun Wada, Kano State, in October 2007 in an act of collective punishment following a false blasphemy allegation still cannot be rebuilt despite a court ruling in favour of one of the churches, ostensibly 'for security reasons.' Congregations worship in the open air, and before each service the Catholic church is obliged to cleanse the remains of the altar of human excrement left there overnight.

In many shari'a states, and particularly in rural areas, underage girls from minority faith communities regularly face abduction, forced conversion and marriage without

parental consent at the hands of local men, usually with the complicity of traditional leaders and religious institutions. Parents seeking the return of their daughters are generally told that they converted and married willingly, or are in the custody of Muslim traditional rulers or Shari'a Commissions and have no desire to return. Appeals to law enforcement agencies generally prove fruitless, despite strong domestic legislation penalising abduction, trafficking and child defilement.

Current cases of concern

Leah Sharibu

On 19 February 2018, 110 girls were abducted from the Government Girls Science and Technical College in Dapchi, Yobe State by terrorists belonging to ISWAP. Credible sources allege the security forces failed to act on warnings of an impending attack. On 21 March 2018, following negotiations with the government, ISWAP returned 104 girls, warning townsfolk never to enrol their children in school again, or they would be seized permanently. Five had died enroute to the terrorists' hideout. However, Leah Sharibu, aged 14 at the time and the sole Christian among them, remains in captivity, declared a 'slave for life' for her refusal to convert as a pre-condition for release.

The Chibok girls

14 April 2026 marked the 12th anniversary of the abduction of 276 girls from the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, a town in southern Borno State, where the population is around 35% Christian. 217 of the abductees were members of the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria. Several have been released, allegedly following significant payments or prisoner exchanges, while others have escaped, initially in the wake of the government's announcement of an amnesty for repentant fighters in 2015, and particularly following the defeat of Boko Haram by IS in 2021. However, 82 Chibok girls are still missing.

Several Chibok girls who returned with children and Boko Haram fighters purporting to be their husbands were housed with these men in government deradicalisation centres. Although the Borno State government asserted the returnees were not coerced into staying with these men, none appear to have received the psychosocial interventions necessary to assist them in processing their ordeal and coming to informed decisions.

Yahaya Sharif-Aminu

On 10 August 2020 a shari'a court in Kano State sentenced 22-year-old Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, a singer and member of the Tijjaniyya Sufi order, to death by hanging for allegedly blaspheming in a song he shared via WhatsApp. On 21

10 CSW, 'Briefing: Conflict-related sexual violence in Nigeria', 19 June 2026 <https://www.csw.org.uk/2026/06/19/report/6821/article.htm>

11 Save the Children, 'Nigeria: At least 10 school kidnappings in less than two years as school safety crisis deepens', 28 November 2025 <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/nigeria-least-10-school-kidnappings-less-two-years-school-safety-crisis-deepens>

12 RFI, 'Nigeria paid Boko Haram ransom for kidnapped pupils: intel sources', 23 February 2026 <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international-news/20260223-nigeria-paid-boko-haram-ransom-for-kidnapped-pupils-intel-sources>

January 2021 the appellate division of the Kano state High Court overturned the sentence, citing procedural irregularities, and ordered a retrial. In February 2022 the Kano state Court of Appeals postponed the retrial of Mr Sharif-Aminu until 12 May, following a request by the Kano State government for more time to file its response to Mr Sharif-Aminu's appeal for an order quashing the High Court's order for a retrial, and nullifying the Kano State shari'a law under which he was charged and sentenced.

On 9 April 2025 the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice found that the blasphemy provisions in Kano State law were incompatible with freedom of expression protections articulated in regional and international human rights instruments, and called on the government to repeal or amend them and similar laws to align with Article 9 (2) of the African Charter.¹³

Victor Solomon (Zidane)

Victor Solomon's community in Kajuru experiences relentless attacks by Fulani militia, in which at least a thousand members of the Adara ethnic group, to which he belongs, have been killed, thousands more have been abducted, countless women and girls have faced sexual violence, and millions have been extorted in ransom payments. In the absence of official assistance, Mr Solomon and other youth organised to defend their people, and former Kaduna State Governor El Rufai, whose tenure was hallmarked by mass killings in southern Kaduna, ordered Mr Solomon's arrest in March 2019. He was detained in an army guardroom and tortured for over a year, then handed to the police who tortured him for three months before eventually arraigning him before court and charging him with culpable homicide for an alleged role in the Kasuwan Magani crisis.¹⁴

As it became clear Mr Solomon might be acquitted, new charges were filed in another High Court accusing him of murdering a Muslim man on 10 April 2018 and harvesting his organs. On 21 May 2024 Mr Solomon was acquitted, discharged, but kept in custody, and on 8 January 2026 he was sentenced to death for criminal conspiracy, grievous harm without provocation and culpable homicide punishable by death. The verdict was questionable for several reasons, including the fact that a police message attached as evidence reportedly stated that the victim's body was found on 29 March 2018, that an autopsy proving the cause of death was available but not provided, that no evidence linked Mr Solomon to the murder scene, that two alleged eyewitnesses for the prosecution gave contradictory evidence, and that new information was introduced that was not included in the original charge, infringing on Mr Solomon's right to a fair hearing. An initial appeal against the sentence was rejected in July 2026.

Du Merci orphanages

In December 2019 armed police officers accompanied by agents of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) raided the Du Merci orphanages in Kano and Kaduna states, arresting co-founder, Professor Richard Solomon Musa Tarfa. Despite his acquittal of abduction and forgery after three years of judicial harassment and imprisonment, the eight youngest of the 27 children seized from the orphanages remained in a government-run orphanage in the Kano State capital, where they have experienced pressure to convert. In 2021 the United Nations (UN) Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that the Tarfa family had been targeted because of their Christian faith and called for the immediate release of the children and appropriate remedies for those affected.¹⁵

On 28 January 2026, 13-year-old David Solomon Tarfa died at the state-run facility after authorities failed to provide medical care for a debilitating stomach condition for over a week. On 3 February the Kano State Ministry of Women Affairs, Children and Disabled, and the Attorney General of Kano, filed, but subsequently withdrew, a suit at the Juvenile Court to access his remains after a post-mortem for a Muslim burial.

On 9 April 2026 Professor Tarfa and his wife and orphanage co-founder Mercy were informed that their presence was requested by the Attorney General of Kano State at a meeting on 15 April for the handover of the seven surviving children. While the professor was unable to attend due to ill health, Mrs Tarfa attended the meeting, accompanied by the family lawyer, their eldest son and an elder daughter. The fractious meeting that ensued commenced late and was filmed by local media invited by the authorities. According to information received by CSW, the children were highly emotional, having been misinformed earlier that if they returned they would be killed, either for converting to Islam, or if they reverted to Christianity.

A document stating that the children had been returned to the Tarfas, and bearing the signatures of the Attorney General, the Commissioner for Women's Affairs and Social Development, the Solicitor General, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry for Women's Affairs and Social Development, Mrs Tarfa, her lawyer and the Tarfas' son, was finalised during the meeting. It also stated that the body of David Tarfa was not being released due to the Coroner's Inquest into his death. However, the commissioner left the proceedings before they ended, taking all the children with her; David's body is still with the coroner at time of writing, and legal proceedings for the return of the other children appear to have been deferred indefinitely.

¹³ Incorporated Trustees of Expression Now Human Rights Initiative v Federal Government of Nigeria, ECW/CCJ/APP/41/23

¹⁴ Relief Web, '55 people killed in violence in northern Nigeria', 21 October 2018 <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/55-people-killed-violence-northern-nigeria>

¹⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Opinion No. 16/2021 concerning Solomon Musa Tarfa, Mercy Solomon Tarfa and 16 minors whose names are known to the Working Group (Nigeria), 23 June 2021 https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Detention/Opinions/Session90/A_HRC_WGAD_2021_16.pdf

Country of Particular Concern (CPC) designation

On 31 October 2025 US President Donald Trump announced the decision to designate Nigeria a CPC in a social media post.¹⁶ On 25 December 2025, and in what the Nigerian government later confirmed was a joint operation, the US bombed the Lakurawa terrorist group's encampments in forested areas of Sokoto State, following weeks of sightings of surveillance aircraft over northern Nigeria, and in February 2026 around 100 US soldiers were deployed to Nigeria as part of increased military cooperation. They arrived amidst an ongoing escalation in terrorist attacks across multiple states, seemingly launched in response to the US president's rhetoric. Meanwhile, members of the US Congress have taken action in relation to the CPC designation, imposing asset freezes on eight individuals convicted in and deported from UAE for their links with Boko Haram and IS, and setting benchmarks for progress.

Recommendations

To the government of Nigeria:

- Formulate a comprehensive strategy to address every source of violence in a swift, decisive and unbiased manner, seeking international assistance where necessary, and ensuring that every vulnerable community receives adequate protection, regardless of the religion, belief or ethnicity of its inhabitants.
- Prioritise justice and provision for all victims of terrorism, seeking the assistance of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) 'in designing and implementing inclusive, context-specific and victim-centred transitional justice processes',¹⁷ and ensuring aid reaches every affected community, including Christians in camps in the Borno State capital that currently receive no federal or state interventions.
- Engage positively with the CPC process, seizing the opportunity to secure assistance to trace and hold funders, facilitators and perpetrators of religion-related violations to account, close the protection gap, and facilitate the return of forcibly displaced communities to their ancestral lands.
- Secure the release and safe return of Leah Sharibu, the remaining Chibok girls, and all others held by violent non-state actors.
- Prioritise the reintegration and return to education of escaped Chibok girls, ensuring they receive psychosocial assistance.
- Combat the impunity surrounding religion-related violence by penalising purveyors of false blasphemy allegations and bringing inciters and perpetrators of violence to justice, thereby strengthening the rule of law.
- Bring state laws and practices into conformity with the federal constitution and Nigeria's regional and

international obligations, ensuring individual states respect FoRB in its entirety, including the right to own land and construct houses of worship.

- Ensure state governments and security operatives enforce laws penalising child abduction, coercive conversion and defilement in shari'a states, and facilitate the swift return of abductees to their families in accordance with Nigeria's Child Rights Act and the nation's obligations under regional and international legislation.
- Fully implement the Safe Schools Initiative, extending it to vulnerable communities throughout the country, and formulate alternative educational arrangements for children in IDP camps.
- Expedite the return of the remaining seven children from the Du Merci orphanages to the care of Professor and Mrs Tarfa, along with the body of David Tarfa for appropriate burial, providing reparations for their trauma, as recommended by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.
- Ensure justice and the right to a fair hearing in the case of Victor Solomon, aka Zidane.
- Review and repeal Section 204 of the Criminal Code, which criminalises blasphemy, ensuring the release of those serving excessive sentences.
- Promote equal citizenship, and consider the creation of an Equity Commission mandated to advance FoRB and respect for religious and ethnic diversity.

To the government of the United States:

- In line with CPC designation, use all available diplomatic, political and economic tools to encourage and assist the Nigerian administration to protect vulnerable communities, hold past and current sponsors and perpetrators of religious violence and discrimination accountable, address discriminatory policies and practices, and obstruct financial activities that enable FoRB violations, while tracing and prosecuting those involved.
- Maintain Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa as Entities of Particular Concern (EPC), and also designate the al-Qaeda affiliate Ansaru, the armed group referred to as the Fulani militia and the Lakurawa and Mahmuda terrorist factions as EPCs.
- Impose sanctions on individuals responsible for human rights violations, including current and former members of state or federal governments who have illustrated or assented to severe and consistent discrimination and/or negligence in their response to militia violence.
- Call on Nigeria to issue a standing invitation to the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, once nominated and confirmed, and USCIRF commissioners, allowing unhindered access to every part of the country, and the freedom to meet with

¹⁶ X, Communication from the White House official account, 31 October 2025 <https://x.com/WhiteHouse/status/1984325028838597035>

¹⁷ OHCHR, Transitional Justice and Human Rights <https://www.ohchr.org/en/transitional-justice>

individuals representing diverse religious groups and members of civil society, while ensuring those they meet with face no reprisals.

- Urge Nigeria to expedite the return of the remaining seven children from the Du Merci orphanages to the care of Professor and Mrs Tarfa, along with the body of David Tarfa for appropriate burial, providing reparations for their trauma, as recommended by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and to ensure justice and the right to a fair hearing in the case of Victor Solomon, aka Zidane.
- Increase humanitarian assistance IDPs and survivors of religious violence, ensuring aid reaches every affected community, including camps for displaced Christians in the Borno State capital, which receive neither governmental nor international assistance.
- Consider appointing a Special Envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad region to monitor and address the relentless, systematic, and egregious FoRB violations by state and non-state actors.
- In light of the suicide on 2 July 2026 of Catholic priest Benjamin Okwy Madu,¹⁸ who served in Massachusetts,¹⁸ consider issuing a Deferred Endorsement Departure (DED) to clergy, victims of religious violence, and all other law-abiding Nigerian citizens resident in the US.
- Urge Nigeria to recalibrate military strategy and resource its armed forces as a matter of urgency, to ensure sufficient protection from terrorist factions for vulnerable communities regardless of their religion or ethnicity, and to address the national security threat posed by Fulani militia in central and southern Nigeria, and armed non-state actors in the northwest.
- Call on Nigeria to combat collusion, inaction or the targeting of members of victim communities by security elements, and to ensure they conduct themselves in accordance with human rights and humanitarian norms.
- Mandate the OHCHR to assist Nigeria 'in designing and implementing inclusive, context-specific and victim-centred transitional justice processes', while also urging Nigeria to ensure aid reaches every affected community, including Christians in camps in the Borno State capital that currently receive no governmental interventions.
- At every appropriate opportunity, urge the government of Nigeria at every level to implement the recommendations highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Nigeria'.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Hold Nigeria to its obligations under international and regional human rights and humanitarian law, and ensure the concerns and recommendations highlighted in this briefing, are consistently raised in public and in private, including during high-level visits and other bilateral exchanges.
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to address the concerns raised in this briefing in their monitoring and reporting on Nigeria.
- Encourage UN Special Procedures to request country visits to Nigeria and ensure that members of civil society can meet with them without reprisal.
- Mandate a Human Rights Council international independent investigation or independent expert to report on the violence in central Nigeria, which has now spread to other regions.
- Utilise the Universal Periodic Review process to raise the concerns and recommendations highlighted in this briefing.

¹⁸ The Tablet, 'Nigerian priest in US believed to have taken own life before visa expiry', 15 July 2026 <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/nigerian-priest-in-us-believed-to-have-taken-own-life-before-visa-expiry/>

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