

Freedom of Religion in Nigeria?

A Briefing Note on the State of Minorities in Nigeria's Northern Regions

Office of Religious Freedom

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6/17/2014

Nigeria at a Glance



Independence: October 1, 1960

Population: approx. 180 million people

Ethnic groups: 250+ ethnic groups: the following are the most populous and politically influential: Hausa and Fulani 29%, Yoruba 21%, Igbo 18%, Ijaw 10%, Kanuri 4%, Ibibio 3.5%, Tiv 2.5%.

Languages: English (official), Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Fulani, 500+ indigenous languages

Religions: Muslim 50%, Christian 40%, indigenous beliefs 10% (all debated)

GDP: \$478.5 billion

Government: Federal Republic of 36 states and one territory, under President Goodluck Jonathan (a Christian Ijaw)



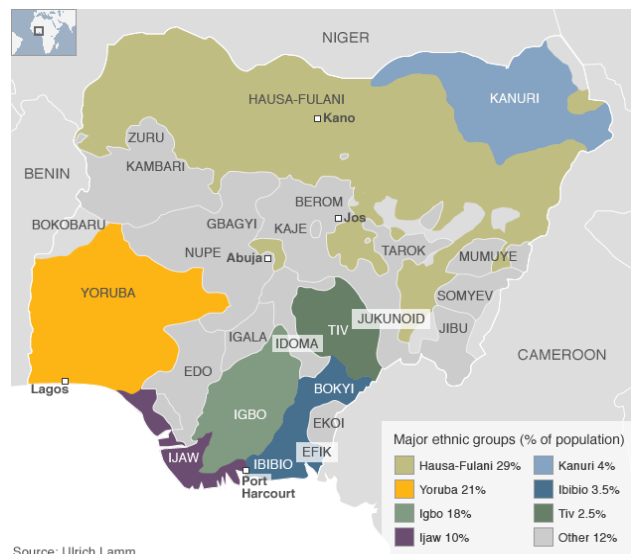
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html>

CONFLICT CHARACTERISTICS

Nigeria has experienced 47 different communal conflicts since 1989.¹ Religion has increasingly played a role in informing political speech, leading to a surge in sectarian violence in Nigeria's north. Violence perpetrated by the Hausa-Fulani Muslim majority on various Christian ethnic minorities in the region has caused widespread outrage among Christian groups who allege systematic religious persecution. These Christian communities are in part made up of migrants from Nigeria's Christian south, but many are also 'local' communities or neighbourhoods contained within predominantly Muslim cities and towns. Christian communities felt further marginalized with the adoption of Shari'a law in 1999, believing this would limit their freedom of religion, access to education, and land rights.² The subsequent Christian vigilante groups formed to 'protect' their communities have engaged in reactive and pre-emptive strikes against Muslim civilian populations, resulting in a combined total of 10,000 violent deaths from 1992-2010.³ Both sides consistently focus on places of worship and business premises of the opposing group, to publicly and violently assert control over that particular space.⁴ With an extremely high rate of fatalities per event (11.1)⁵ of both Hausa Muslims and Christian minorities in the North, Nigeria has re-entered Minority Rights' *Peoples under Threat* top ten in 2013. This is exacerbated by the Nigerian military, which is accused of hundreds of arbitrary killings in an attempt at managing the conflict.⁶

- January 2010: In Kuru Karama, 167 Muslims are killed by their Christian neighbours, sparing Christian homes.⁷
- March 2010: In Jos, Hausa-Fulani men kill between 70 and 500 Christians. 300 Muslims killed in retribution.⁸
- 2011 Riots: Triggered by victory of President Jonathan, an estimated 938 die and 350 Churches destroyed.⁹
- March 2014: In Katsina and Kaduna states, About 70 Christians killed.¹⁰ Three days later, at least 100 more villagers are killed.¹¹

Communal violence levels in Nigeria are more than double the African average, and involve more than simple religious differences.¹² Ethnicity, religious affiliation and regional alliances have become the basis of political mobilization, and the conception of religion and ethnicity tend to overlap. There are two distinct types of peoples in Nigeria: 'indigenous' and 'non-indigenous'. Indigenous ethnic groups, original inhabitants with an 'indigeneity certificate', can claim a disproportionate share of public resources.¹³ Settlers on the other hand are 'migrants' and are subject to discrimination by the state and neighbouring groups, even though they may have inhabited that area for generations.¹⁴ Indigenes point out, however, that they do not enjoy the same rights outside their traditional 'homelands' – as



witnessed by the extreme violence against indigenous Christian groups in the north. This policy exacerbates land conflicts, especially between Fulani herdsmen and their ethnic neighbours.¹⁵

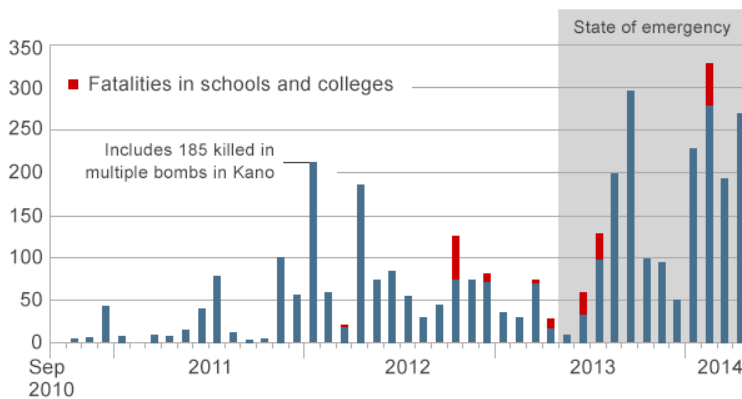
Thus, religion and ethnicity are two quasi-distinct elements characterizing the conflict in northern Nigeria. Religion acts as an excuse for political discrimination, a means to define ethnic identity and as a form of legitimacy for violent means to seek power. Pew Forum notes that Nigeria is one of only nine countries in the world without a clear religious minority, and the introduction of Shari'a has aroused backlash as groups feel inaccurately portrayed as minorities, with their rights more easily discounted.¹⁶ Muslim groups perpetrating violence against their Christian neighbours in an effort to concretize this majority-minority dichotomy.

POSSIBLE CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND IMPACTS

Causes: Nigeria was carved out by colonial powers with little regard for religious, linguistic, and ethnic characteristics, and 'united' millions of people from hundreds of different ethnic and cultural groups. Pre-existing differences between groups were aggravated and reinforced by British colonialism. The Southern populations were exposed to and later adopted European-style institutions and education systems, resulting in increased literacy rates, economic growth, bureaucratic social norms, and Christianity. (See Annex).¹⁷ The Northern regions were governed completely differently, through the use of existing and compliant autocratic Emirs.¹⁸ These two distinct regions were amalgamated into the newly independent Federal Republic of Nigeria in 1961.¹⁹ Eventually, political parties formed along geographic and ethnic lines, some of which have not hesitated to indirectly utilize violence against opposition groups.²⁰ Directly after independence, a series of coups and political assassinations of both Christian and Muslim leaders continued until the 1967 civil war. Since the 1980s, conflicts between Muslims and Christians or between ethnic groups have resurged, and today, the country's "middle belt" is especially prone to violence, as it represents the convergence of Hausa/Fulani Muslims and non-Muslim groups.²¹

Consequences: Building on the existing communal tensions, the Islamist sect Boko Haram has elevated the conflict dialogue to one of secession by seeking to establish an Islamic state in northern Nigeria through attacks against Christians, churches, businesses and homes, and even moderate Muslims from other traditions. Their anti-establishment violence (as demonstrated by the UN bombings of 2011 in Abuja among others) is often completely indiscriminate and tends to occur more frequently in areas that are more homogeneously Muslim.²² Suicide bombings, targeted assassinations, mass kidnappings and forced conversions have all escalated in recent months, and Boko Haram leaders have called upon "Christians in Nigeria to accept Islam" as a condition for peace.²³ Since the beginning of 2014, it is estimated that Boko Haram has killed between 1500-1800 people in 52 separate attacks.²⁴ Suspected attacks in 2014 alone include:²⁵

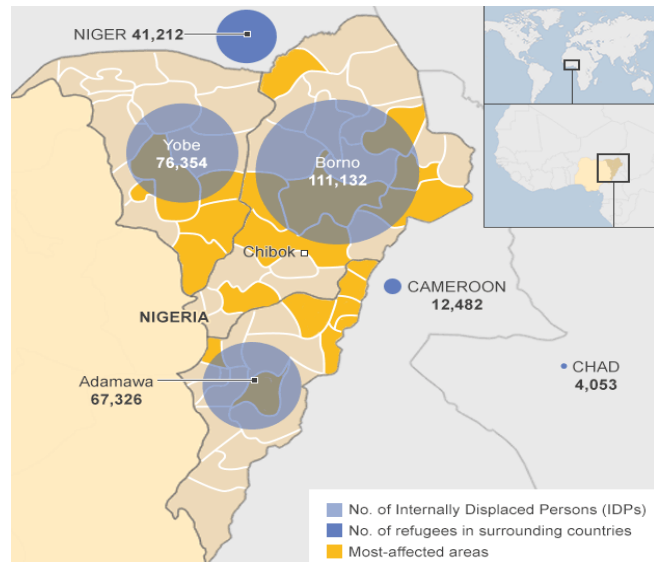
Reported civilian deaths in Boko Haram attacks Sep 2010 - Apr 2014



Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, created by Prof. Clionadh Raleigh, University of Sussex

- January 19: attack on a Church in Adamawa State killed 47 people
- February 25: burning down of a Christian college and school in Adamawa State killed 37
- March 1: two bombs kill 52 in the Muslim State of Borno
- March 14: attack on a prison in Borno State releases more than 1,000 detainees. Responding government soldiers are alleged to have summarily executed up to 664 more civilians and detainees that day.

Impact: According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the crisis in Nigeria has become so severe that more than 520,000 people have been forced to flee their homes, and has a significant impact on the surrounding region.²⁶ Chad, Niger and Cameroon are providing shelter to more than just refugees, however. Criminal gangs in Niger have alleged that Boko Haram militants rely on them for recruits and information on troop movements in the area. In exchange, they receive what amounts to substantial amounts of money, regardless of whether they buy into Boko Haram's Islamist ideology. This has turned into violent operations against locals.²⁷ Although supposedly secured by joint patrols, the Niger-Nigeria border remains open. Cameroon has recently announced troop deployments to curb growing



fears that Boko Haram has been using the border regions as a safe haven from which to launch attacks on Nigerian targets.²⁸ This is further compounded by the recent kidnappings that have been claimed by Boko Haram in the northern reaches of Cameroon.²⁹ The movement of militants and arms unchecked across fragile Africa's Sahel region has serious implications for security. Long-term refugee populations of various ethnicities mixing with local populations in Chad, Cameroon and Niger may destabilize communal relations in their host countries, especially since Niger has thus far refused the presence of refugee camps, fearing that they may become targets for attacks or centres of radicalization.³⁰ Therefore, refugee populations, at times up to 500 people per week, are living in a fairly integrated manner with local Nigerians.

Conspiracy Theories³¹

- Politicians in the north sponsor Boko Haram to make the country "ungovernable" for President Goodluck Jonathan.
- President Jonathan sponsors Boko Haram either to mobilize support from the south and Christians or to weaken and de-populate the North ahead of the 2015 presidential election.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND MODELS TO EXPLAIN THE CONFLICT

Theory of Collective Action:

Factors such as salience of ethno-cultural **identity**, **incentives** for political action, **capacities** for collective action and **opportunities** in a certain group's political environment are activated by characteristics and circumstances of communal identity.³² Collective interests form the basis for group mobilization,³³ and collective action is one way the religious conflict between Muslims and Christians in northern Nigeria can be explained. Religion as a collective identity has certainly influenced in forming the identity of Nigerians, and this is more visible especially in the north of the country. With asserting whether one is Muslim or Christian as a necessary precondition for mobilization, the parties search for incentives for action. Muslims in the North have incentives such resentment about past losses as well as the ability to self govern (i.e. by imposing Shari'a law in the North), and as a collectively disadvantaged group both economically and politically, the incentive for Muslims to attach Christians becomes greater as collective disadvantages become greater. Once collective identity has become salient and there are incentives for collective action, with given capacities and political opportunities, collective action has been made possible. Capacities for collective action include geographic concentration and pre-existing organization, and the Muslim concentration in the North and the already existing Emir system has made the Muslims more capable in waging violence against Christian minorities in the North. Once these conditions for collective actions are met, members of the religious group wait for political

opportunities which include strategic assessments, tactical decisions of leaders and uses of state power to mobilize against the other religious group, usually in the form of violence against Christian minorities in the case of Nigeria.

Secularization Theory

The secularization theory holds that “Christianity, with its value centred on the promotion of Western education intrinsically brings about the rationalization—independence in thought—which naturally reduces the significance or organized associations such as religion,”³⁴ and this process of secularization can be largely seen in the Christian South of Nigeria. Muslims in the North, especially Boko Haram, are opposed to the secularization of the Nigerian state,³⁵ and in order to overcome secularization or religious decline that comes with progressive modernization, they are attempting to reassert their religious identity and freedom in the North by imposing Shari’a law in the North as well as attacking Christians living in the North.

Theory of Relative Deprivation

Donald Horowitz’s theory of relative deprivation could account for the communal violence witnessed in northern Nigeria. As an underdeveloped group in an economically poor region, they are what Horowitz terms a ‘backwards group in a backwards region.’ These types of groups become mobilized when they perceive their relative economic and /or political position and opportunities to be declining or lesser than that of their ethnic neighbours. This theory also involves conflict induced by competition for scarce resources. Frances Stewart’s concept of ‘horizontal inequalities’ complements this, and adds other categories of potential grievances between group including social inequalities (including access to education and health care) and cultural (recognition of language, religion, norms etc.) In Nigeria, the perception of inequality exists on both sides of the conflict. Northern Nigerians may perceive their economic status to be far below that of their southern (Christian) neighbours. The poverty gap between the north and the oil-rich south (see Annex) is only widening, and this is compounded by similar gaps in education and health. According to Stewart, these inequalities can cause deep resentment that may lead to violence struggles.³⁶ On the other hand, Christian minorities in the North perceive their cultural and social rights to be at risk, forced to compete for social and political space with a vocal, if small, majority.

POLICY OPTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nigeria re-entered *Peoples under Threat* top ten in 2013 as the threat rose from conflict between Christians and Muslims in the North. This shows that there are egregious violations of the right to freedom of religion in Nigeria, and the mandate of the Office states that activities opposing religious hatred and intolerance and promoting pluralism abroad will be centered on countries or situations where such violations exist.

	POLICY OPTION	PROS	CONS
A	<i>Maintain the status quo:</i> Though Canada enjoys strong and increasing bilateral relations with Nigeria, these relations are mostly trade-related. As of now, the Office of Religious Freedom has begun a two-year conflict mediation project worth \$553,643 for the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.	Confronting the conflict in Northern Nigeria in more actionable may unwittingly insert Canada into Boko Haram’s growing anti-Western narrative. With increasing Canadian interests in Nigeria, this could provoke attacks on Canadians and Canadian interests within Nigeria. Therefore, maintaining the status quo will put Canada out of harm’s way while at the same time allowing the ORF to still follow its mandate through its conflict mediation project.	-The conflict and the religious violence in Northern Nigeria will continue without a more actionable intervention. -By maintaining the status quo, Canada will not be stopping the current egregious violations of the right to freedom of religion in Nigeria, and by doing so Canada will not meet one of Canada’s foreign-policy priorities.
B	<i>Provide legal counsel to victims of violence in who may be having difficulty presenting cases to the Nigerian court system:</i> Canada can help file claims and put pressure on the Nigerian	-By a non-confrontational action like this, Canada attracts less attention and threats from actors like Boko Haram. -This policy option will help	-Participating in any type of conflict mediation or resolution without a direct invitation from the Nigerian government could jeopardize Canadian-Nigerian

	<p>legal system. This could also take the form of assistance to the Federal Ministry of Justice and state-level ministries in setting up a robust witness protection program and helping dispel the current culture of impunity for crimes committed, or through funding of local initiatives already versed in the complexities of the Nigerian legal system.³⁷</p>	<p>strengthen the fragile legal system in Nigeria in the long run while assisting victims of religious violence in the North.</p>	<p>relations, as even the smallest gesture could appear to be an incursion on Nigeria’s sovereignty, which President Jonathan is especially sensitive to. -Time consuming and needs considerable amounts of capital and human resources.</p>
C	<p><i>Continue to fund local or international NGOs and conflict-resolution actors to promote religious freedom and tolerance from the ground up:</i> The Office of Religious Freedom fund provides financial grants to eligible recipients including non-governmental, non-profit, and inter-governmental organizations based in Nigeria and abroad.³⁸ Expanding the current two-year conflict mediation project worth \$553,643 for the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue to include Nigerian grass-roots movements and to raise more awareness. This amount represents a small portion of the total \$5M budget, most of which has remained un-spent. Focussing on a variety of Nigerian organizations for conflict mediation and awareness and larger international organizations for data gathering could contribute to ending the protracted conflict.</p>	<p>-The Religious Freedom Fund already exists under the Office of Religious Freedom -The Office has the freedom to select a recipient that best represents mandate of the Office of Religious Freedom before investing its Fund.</p>	<p>-Canada or the Office will not have direct control over how the recipients of financial grants operate or conduct their activity once the funding has been assigned.</p>
D	<p><i>Call on the government of Nigeria and parties to the conflict both publicly and privately:</i> This is to make sure that the perpetrators, planners and organizers of religious violence in Northern Nigeria, including incidents of reported mass murders, are promptly investigated, prosecuted and punished, according to international fair trial standards.³⁹</p>	<p>-The conflict will get more international attention and the international community including like-minded states too will join Canada in assisting the victims of religious violence.</p>	<p>-Canada will draw attention from parties like Boko Haram, which is likely to insert Canada into its anti-Western narrative. -Canada’s diplomatic relationship with Nigeria is one of Canada’s two strategic bilateral relations in Sub-Saharan Africa, and this policy could have a negative impact on these bilateral relations.</p>

RECOMMENDED POLICY OPTION –POLICY OPTION “C”

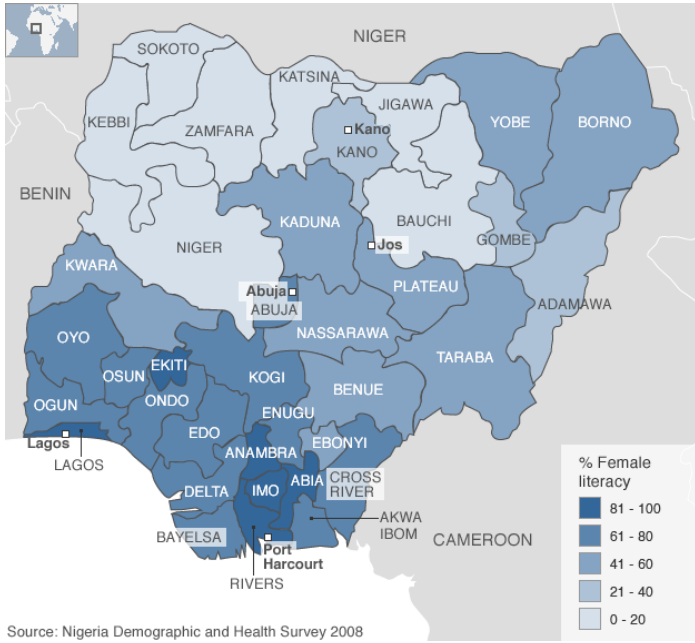
Fund local or international NGOs and conflict-resolution actors to promote religious freedom and tolerance

Policy Option C allows the Government of Canada to participate in the creation of a long and lasting peace for the people of Nigeria. The current funding of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue is a good start; however with so much money left to be spent by the ORF, Canada’s impact could be far greater. By funding more grassroots Nigerian movements rather than large international efforts, the people of Nigeria may see these efforts as more legitimate and they may have farther-reaching impact on the ground. While not having direct control of the funds spent, Canada is able to maintain good relations with its important trading partner while not intruding into Nigerian sovereignty.

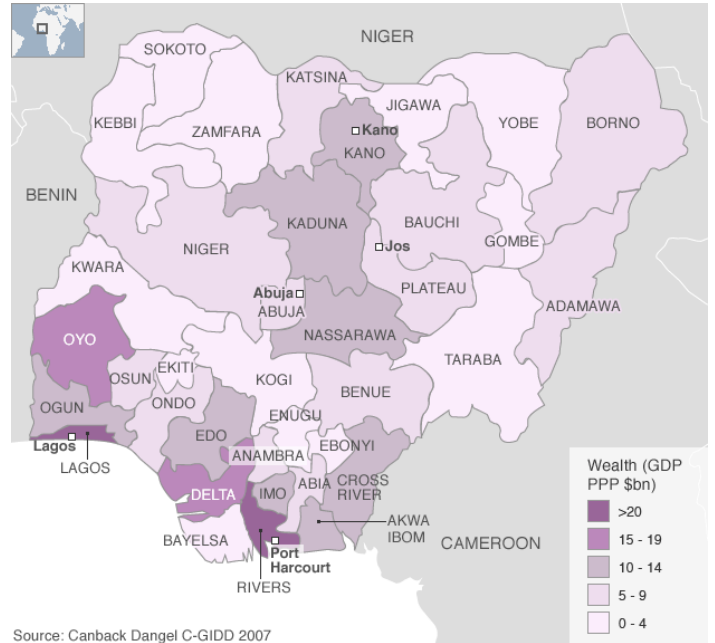
Possible activities that the Office could fund include:⁴⁰

- Awareness projects designed to integrate issues of tolerance and education on freedom of religion.
- Support for multilateral organizations working directly or indirectly on freedom of religion and/or on tolerance and dialogue among different religious groups.
- Research on religious freedom to support government engagement in religious tolerance and pluralism.
- Support academics or research groups that study freedom of religion and develop tools to help the government understand freedom of religion and discrimination against religious communities.
- Legal support or specialized services to support religious freedom and respect for pluralism on behalf of persecuted groups or individuals.

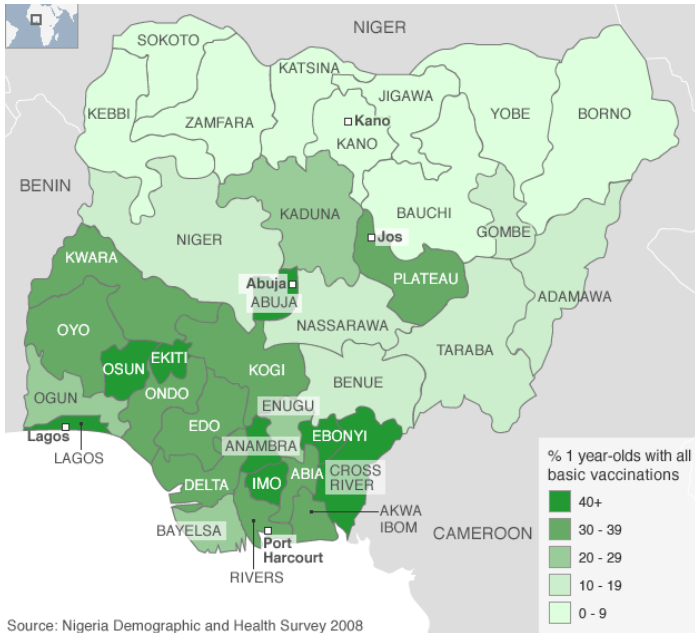
ANNEX



Map: 1 Female Literacy



Map: 1 Nigeria's Wealth Divide



Map: 3 Vaccination Rates

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- 16 See International Crisis Group, “Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict”
- 17 Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, *The Biafra War: Nigeria and the Aftermath* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 24.
- 18 See Ekwe-Ekwe, *The Biafra War: Nigeria and the Aftermath*
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- 24 “Nigeria: More than 1500 Killed in Armed Conflict in North-Eastern Nigeria in Early 2014”. Amnesty International Publications. 2014. Retrieved from: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AFR44/004/2014/en/543f7ac9-6889-4f02-bf5a-d73832e04229/afr440042014en.pdf>
- 25 See Amnesty International, “Nigeria: More than 1500 Killed”
- 26 See Amnesty International, “Nigeria: More than 1500 Killed”
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³⁵ See Jidefor Adibe, “Explaining the Emergence of Boko Haram”

³⁶ Horizontal Inequalities as a Cause of Conflict: A Review of CRISE Findings. World Development Report 2011 Background paper. Frances Stewart. August 20, 2010

³⁷ See Human Rights Watch, *"Leave Everything to God"*

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⁴⁰ See The Religious Freedom Fund (DFATD)