

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 29, 2022

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary
United States Department of State
2201 C St NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

As you are well aware, horrific acts of deadly violence have been committed against Nigerian Christians in recent weeks, including the massacre of churchgoers on Pentecost Sunday and the stoning of a Christian college student. Sadly, such violence has become all too familiar for Christians in Africa's most populous country. Last year, however, you inexplicably removed Nigeria's designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) despite no demonstrable improvement in the country's religious freedom conditions. On the contrary, the situation in Nigeria has grown worse. We previously urged you to immediately reverse your misguided decision, and we write today to renew our call.

Recent high-profile acts of violence underscore the intense religious persecution that is regularly experienced by Nigerian Christians. On Pentecost Sunday, gunmen attacked St. Francis Catholic Church in Nigeria's Ondo state, reportedly killing at least 50 churchgoers. Last month, a violent mob brutally stoned to death Deborah Emmanuel Yakubu, a student at Shehu Shagari College of Education in northwest Nigeria. According to reports, some Islamist students were enraged by a "blasphemous" message Deborah had posted in a WhatsApp group, in which she said that "Jesus Christ is the greatest. He helped me pass my exams." Merely expressing one's Christian faith has apparently become tantamount to a death sentence in many parts of Nigeria.

Religious violence and intolerance directed toward Nigerian Christians has worsened in recent years. One report documented more than 4,650 cases of Nigerian Christians who were killed for their faith in 2021. Accordingly, Nigeria earns the dubious honor—for the second consecutive year—of being the deadliest country on earth for Christians.

We wrote last year that "[n]ot only has the government of Nigeria failed to take meaningful steps to mitigate such violence, but Nigerian authorities restrict and crack down on religious minorities and detain individuals indefinitely on blasphemy-related charges." We remain concerned that the Nigerian government is failing to protect the religious freedom and basic safety of its Christian citizens. Furthermore, as this year's annual reports from the bipartisan U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and from your own Department make clear, Nigerian government authorities directly participate in the persecution of Christians, Muslims, and even non-theists, most notoriously through arrests and convictions under blasphemy laws. Make no mistake: continued enforcement of state-sanctioned blasphemy laws enables the type of deadly violence that killed Deborah Emmanuel Yakubu and so many others.

When we previously wrote you, we were met with a response which failed to answer our questions about why the State Department views Nigeria as not having engaged in or tolerated “systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom” or even “severe violations of religious freedom.” This is unacceptable, especially because you are required by federal law to consider the recommendation of USCIRF—which, since 2009, has been to designate Nigeria as a CPC. In fact, USCIRF reiterated in its 2022 Annual Report that it was “appalled” at the removal of Nigeria’s CPC designation. Despite public statements from you and other State Department officials condemning the recent bloodshed in Nigeria, the fact remains that the Department still does not officially regard Nigeria as a severe violator of religious freedom.


The State Department released its 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom on June 2, which starts the 90-day timeline for the Department to make its religious freedom designations. Given the abysmal state of religious freedom in Nigeria, it is incumbent upon you to reverse last year’s decision and redesignate the country as a CPC. The moment demands that you do so without delay.

We look forward to your swift action on this important matter.


Sincerely,




Josh Hawley
United States Senator



Marco Rubio
United States Senator



Mike Braun
United States Senator



James M. Inhofe
United States Senator



Tom Cotton
United States Senator

CC:
The Honorable Rashad Hussain
Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom
United States Department of State
2201 C St NW
Washington, D.C. 20520