

Debate Pack

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Freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria

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1 Summary

A Westminster Hall debate on freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria will take place on Tuesday 6 February 2024, from 9:30-11:00am. The debate was scheduled by the Backbench Business Committee and will be led by Jim Shannon MP.

2 Background

Nigeria is ranked number six in the world on the 2024 World Watch List, a ranking of countries where Christians face the most extreme persecution, compiled by Open Doors, an NGO which supports Christians worldwide. According to their data, 82% of the 4,998 Christians [killed for faith-related reasons globally in 2023](#) occurred in Nigeria. Fiona Bruce MP [led a debate on religious persecution and the World Watch List 2024](#) in Westminster Hall on 25 January 2024. Jim Shannon MP [requested this debate](#) [PDF] focus on Nigeria because of the “continuing catalogue of violence.”

2.1 Data on killings and persecution

Several organisations collate and compile information on persecution of Christians in Nigeria, some as part of wider analysis of Christian persecution globally.

The Observatory of Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA), based in the Netherlands, collates data on killings and abductions of civilians. In July 2023 ORFA made a [submission about Nigeria](#) for its Universal Periodic Review during the 45th session of the Human Rights Council. This submission provides data and analysis for the period October 2019 to September 2022. During this time period 12,793 Christians were killed out of a total of 27,183 recorded killings, and 7,923 Christians were abducted. The numbers increased year-on-year (see table below).

Number of Christians killed or abducted 2020 to 2022		
Year	Killed	Abducted
2020	3,613	977
2021	4,303	2,312
2022	4,877	4,634
Total	12,793	7,923

Source: Observatory of Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA), [ORFA Submission to the Universal Periodic Review During 45th Session of Human Rights Council](#), 26 July 2023

In September 2023 the ORFA [published a report](#) comparing numbers from April to June 2023 (Q2 2023) with the same time period the previous year (Q2 2022). Their data [shows a 2% decrease in killings](#) during Q2 2023 compared to the previous year. There was a larger reduction in the number of abductions year on year, down by 41% in Q2 2023 compared to the same time period in 2022.

ORFA also notes that [there was a “significant 54% decrease” in the number of attacks](#) targeting communities (villages, neighbourhoods for example) with fatalities in Q2 2023 compared to Q2 2022. However, there was a 4% increase in other attacks (during worship, on the road or farms).

[According to ORFA](#), between April and June 2023 there were:

1. 1,637 recorded deaths of Christians
2. 642 Christians abducted
3. 119 attacks on communities with fatalities
4. 511 other attacks

In its 2022 [submission to the Human Rights Council](#), ORFA states “violence is escalating, spreading, and the actors are diversifying.” It also says that Christians are “disproportionately affected to the extent that we can suggest there may be deliberate targeting”.

Christmas 2023 attacks

Jim Shannon MP, who is leading the debate, cited the Christmas killings of Christians in Nigeria in his [submission to the Backbench Business Committee](#).

On Christmas Eve, [several villages in Plateau State were attacked](#) with the reported deaths of at least 160 people. Those responsible are [believed to be Fulani militants](#) (see next section). Open Doors says it is estimated [eight churches were burned down](#) and 15,000 internally displaced as a result of the attacks.

Geographic spread

There are more than 100 million Christians in Nigeria, out of a population of 216 million, according to a detailed [country profile of Nigeria](#) [PDF] compiled by Open Doors. Although Nigeria is often thought to be divided into a predominantly Christian south and a predominantly Muslim north, Open Doors cautions many Christians live in the north, particularly the north-

central region. Open Doors says [persecution and discrimination](#) are strongest in the three northern geo-political zones.

2.2

What is driving violent attacks?

Nigeria has multiple security challenges affecting security across the country. The long-running [Boko Haram Islamist insurgency](#) continues to destabilise the north-east and displaces thousands of people. Violence between herders and farming communities has [spread from the central belt southwards](#), and there are other long-running disputes in the Niger Delta and the south-east.

Jim Shannon MP, who is leading the debate on Tuesday 6 February, wrote in a foreword to a [report on Nigeria](#) that a “significant driver of religious-based persecution in Nigeria is Islamist extremism.”

Open Doors says that [violence by Islamist extremist groups](#) such as Fulani militants, Boko Haram and ISWAP (Islamic State in West African Province) increased during the presidency of Muhammadu Buhari “putting Nigeria at the epicentre of targeted violence against the church.”

In central Nigeria, Open Doors [identifies the Fulani Ethnic Militia](#), an armed group with ethnic ties to pastoralist Fulani people, as responsible for many attacks on predominantly Christian villages “abducting, raping and killing people, destroying buildings and harvests or occupying farmlands.”

In December 2023, the news agency Reuters said that [violence in the central region is the “worst since 2018.”](#) It notes that violence is often characterised as ethno-religious - chiefly Muslim Fulani herdsman clashing with mainly Christian farmers. However, [Reuters also cautions](#) that conflict may be more about the availability of resources rather than ethnic or religious differences, with climate change among a range of factors creating competition for land, pushing farmers and herders into conflict:

Nomadic cattle herders are from northern Nigeria, which is getting drier and becoming more prone to drought and floods. That is forcing them to trek further south, where farmers are increasing production as the population rapidly expands.

In [analysis published in 2022](#), the NGO Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) said attacks on the Christian community had risen since 2020 “amid a wider increase in violence targeting civilians around the country.”

Further analysis of the drivers of conflict is available in a report from the All Party Group for International Freedom of Religion and Belief, chaired by Jim Shannon MP and Fiona Bruce MP, entitled [Nigeria: Unfolding genocide? Three years on](#) [PDF]. Open Doors [World Watch List 2023 report](#) [PDF] provides an overview of the situation in Nigeria. More detailed analysis of the drivers of

persecution is also available in [World Watch List Nigeria country profile report](#) [PDF] published in April 2023.

2.3

UK Government response

The British High Commissioner [raised the Christmas Eve attacks](#) in Plateau with the Nigerian National Security Advisor. Andrew Mitchell, the Minister for International Development and Africa, said [the High Commissioner works closely](#) “with the respective authorities to raise and address these issues through multiple forums.” The then Foreign Secretary [discussed insecurity with President Tinubu](#) and the National Security Advisor Nuhu Ribadu in August 2023. Supporting Nigeria to address conflict is a focus of the [UK-Nigeria Security and Defence Partnership](#).

Fiona Bruce was appointed the UK Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion and Belief by the UK Government in 2020. Fiona Bruce has introduced a Private Members Bill to establish an Office of the Special Envoy. The Government [indicated it will support this measure at Second Reading of the Bill](#) on 26 January 2024.

The Foreign Affairs Committee examined [UK relations with Nigeria](#) in the context of the 2021 Integrated Review in a report published in April 2022. While religious persecution was not a focus of the report, the Committee heard concerns about the treatment of religious minorities by the Government.

3

Press and media articles

The following is a selection of press and media articles relevant to this debate.

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[Plateau state violence: Churches and mosques burnt in Nigeria as curfew imposed in Mangu](#)

BBC News Online
Mansur Abubakar
25 January 2024

[The Root Causes of Nigeria's Blasphemy Laws: Unravelling Bias, Violence, and Power Abuse](#)

International Organisation for Peace-building and Social Justice [PSJ UK]
Toyosi Clement
23 January 2024

[Blinken visits Nigeria as questions swirl about civilian deaths and U.S. security ties](#)

The Intercept
Nick Turse
23 January 2024

[After Christmas attacks on Christians, Nigerian bishops raise concerns of Islamist agenda - and government complicity](#)

America: Jesuit Review
Kevin Clarke
11 January 2024

[Religious Rumbings](#)

Council on Foreign Relations Blog
Ebenezer Obadare
10 January 2024

[Update: Christians lead peace march in Plateau State, Nigeria – and survivors share their stories](#)

Open Doors
10 January 2024

[USCIRF calls for congressional hearing after State Department fails to designate Nigeria and India as countries of particular concern](#)

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
4 January 2024

Revealed: media 'bias' and the cycle of Christmas terror attacks on Christians

Lindisfarne Centre for the Study of Christian Persecution
2 January 2024

Nigerian military's statements of defense on Jihadist Fulani herdsmen massacre of over 200 Plateau Christians and killing of "6,880 terrorists" in 2023 mired in inconsistencies, contradictions and unanswered questions

International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law [Intersociety] Blog
Babalola Dawodu
1 January 2024

Death toll rises to 150 following Christmas Eve attack in Nigeria

Voice of America
Timothy Obiezu
27 December 2023

USCIRF alarmed by rising violence against religious groups in Nigeria

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
14 December 2023

Nigeria: Military attempting to cover up mass killing of civilians

Amnesty International
7 December 2023

Amid killings of Christians, experts warn Nigeria may risk 'religious war'

Crux
Ngala Killian Chimtom
4 December 2023

Atheists face discrimination, forced into hiding in Nigeria's north

Premium Times Special Report
Uchenna Igwe
3 August 2023

4

Government statements on Gov.UK

[45th Universal Periodic Review of human rights: UK statement on Nigeria UK Mission to the WTO, UN and Other International Organisations \(Geneva\)](#)

24 January 2024

The UK delivered a statement during Nigeria's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

[UK's £38 million aid making a difference in Nigeria – Foreign Secretary James Cleverly](#)

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

3 August 2023

Foreign Secretary James Cleverly announced that over £38 million of UK humanitarian assistance has saved lives of conflict-affected people in North-East Nigeria.

[UK Minister for Africa statement on upcoming Nigeria elections](#)

British High Commission Abuja

21 February 2023

Minister for Africa and Development Andrew Mitchell gave a statement ahead of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

5

PQs

Nigeria: Christianity

23 Jan 2024 | 9641

Asked by: Ruth Jones

To ask the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, what steps his Department has taken to help tackle anti-Christian violence in Nigeria in the Christmas 2023 period.

Answering member: Mr Andrew Mitchell | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Rising insecurity has undermined freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria and affected all faith and non-faith communities, including Christians. It is crucial that the fundamental driving factors are addressed. The British High Commissioner raised the recent attacks in Plateau with the Nigerian National Security Adviser, and the UK works closely with the respective authorities to raise and address these issues through multiple forums. The UK Government's 'Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Nigeria' (SPRING) programme will help tackle the interlinked root causes of intercommunal conflict, including security, justice, and natural resource management challenges.

Nigeria: Religious Freedom

19 Jan 2024 | 9863

Asked by: Patrick Grady

To ask the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, what support his Department is providing to organisations promoting freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria.

Answering member: Mr Andrew Mitchell | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Rising insecurity in Nigeria has affected all faith and non-faith communities, including Christians. UK Government officials and I regularly raise freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), including the impact of insecurity on communities and the need to bring perpetrators to justice, with the Nigerian Government. The UK supports Nigeria to deliver on its constitutional commitment to FoRB through our development programming and security cooperation. We have funded peacebuilding projects to build dialogue between religious groups and, through the Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Nigeria programme, will help Nigeria to tackle the causes of intercommunal conflict.

[Nigeria: Christianity](#)

18 Jan 2024 | 8977

Asked by: Andrew Bridgen

To ask the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, whether he has held recent discussions with his counterpart in Nigeria on the persecution of Christians in that country.

Answering member: Mr Andrew Mitchell | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Promoting the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is one of the UK's longstanding human rights priorities. Rising insecurity has impeded on the rights of people of all faiths in Nigeria. The UK supports Nigeria to deliver on its constitutional commitment to FoRB through ongoing development programming and security cooperation. The UK also regularly raises FoRB with the Nigerian Government and will be an active participant in the upcoming UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process for Nigeria which provides an opportunity to raise questions and recommendations on a country's human rights record, including FoRB.

[Nigeria: Diplomatic Service](#)

11 Jan 2024 | 8398

Asked by: Lyn Brown

To ask the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, what consular assistance has been provided to British nationals who are (a) former and (b) current members of the Synagogue Church of all Nations in Nigeria since March 2010; and if he has made representations to his counterparts in Nigeria on consular cases involving that Church.

Answering member: Mr Andrew Mitchell | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The FCDO is deeply concerned about the reports of violence and abuse surrounding the Synagogue Church of All Nations. We have raised these allegations with Nigerian State Government representatives and will also raise with the Federal authorities. We take all reports of crime, including sexual assault and violence against British nationals overseas very seriously and encourage British nationals who want to raise such allegations, whether current or historic, to contact our consular teams who can support them to report these to the authorities. British nationals in Nigeria in need of urgent help can call us on +234 (9) 462 3100 or if in the UK +44 20 7008 5000.

[Nigeria: Development Aid](#)

11 Dec 2023 | HL692

Asked by: Lord Alton of Liverpool

To ask His Majesty's Government what steps UK AID Direct has taken to ensure

that a proportion of UK Aid funds to Nigeria are dedicated to (1) reducing conflict based on religion or belief, and (2) promoting freedom of religion and belief in the region.

Answering member: Lord Benyon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Insecurity has impeded on the rights of people of all faiths in Nigeria. UK Aid Direct closed in October 2023 but the UK continues to support Nigeria to deliver on its constitutional commitment to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) through our development programming and security cooperation. Since 2020, we have provided over £80,000 in funding to promote FoRB in Nigeria, including peacebuilding projects to build dialogue between religious groups, in Plateau, Kaduna, Benue and Niger States. In April 2023 we launched the £40 million Strengthening Peace and Resilience in Nigeria programme (SPRING) to help Nigeria tackle the causes of conflict.

Nigeria: Terrorism

06 Dec 2023 | HL500

Asked by: Lord Alton of Liverpool

To ask His Majesty's Government how they marked Red Wednesday on 22 November, with particular reference to the rise in religious persecution in Africa, and whether they noted the associated presence in London of two survivors of the terrorist attack on a church in Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria, in which 40 people died, and their plea to the UK and Nigerian governments to work with one another in bringing the perpetrators to justice.

Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Promoting the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) for all is one of the UK's longstanding human rights priorities. To mark Red Wednesday this year, FCDO buildings lit up in red, demonstrating our solidarity with Christians and all people across the world facing persecution because of their faith or beliefs. The UK Prime Minister's Special Envoy for FoRB, Fiona Bruce MP, hosted a gathering of Parliamentarians, where they heard from Margaret Attah, a survivor of a terrorist attack on St Francis Xavier Church in Owo, Nigeria, and her husband, Dominic. We continue to call for those who committed this attack to be brought to justice and held to account.

Nigeria: Christianity and Human Rights

12 Jun 2023 |187335

Asked by: Sarah Owen

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what recent assessment his Department has made of the impact of the UK-Nigeria partnership on (a) strengthening human rights and (b)

supporting efforts to (i) uphold security and (ii) prevent violence against Christians in Nigeria.

Answering member: Mr Andrew Mitchell | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Insecurity is impacting Nigerian communities of all faiths and undermining freedom of religion or belief, including in predominately Christian areas. I [Andrew Mitchell] raised the effects of rising insecurity on communities with then presidential candidate Bola Tinubu, in December 2022. The UK is funding peacebuilding projects in several Nigerian states which support community reconciliation by training peace ambassadors and faith leaders. Through our UK-Nigeria Security and Defence Partnership, we monitor the progress and effectiveness of our support to Nigeria to tackle insecurity and promote human rights. The UK Government looks forward to continuing this partnership at the next annual dialogue later this year. We will continue to help tackle insecurity and promote human rights, and to encourage the Nigerian Government to assist affected communities and implement long-term solutions.

Nigeria: Christianity

22 Feb 2023 | HL5532

Asked by: Lord Alton of Liverpool

To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the alleged attacks on 5 February in villages in the Bokkos area of Plateau State in Nigeria; and what representations they have made to the government of Nigeria concerning who may have been responsible for these incidents.

Answering member: Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

His Majesty's Government condemns the 5 February attacks on villages in Bokkos district and all incidents of violence against civilians in Nigeria. These attacks must be investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice. Minister of State for Development and Africa, Andrew Mitchell, discussed the issue of increased violence in Nigeria with the country's leading presidential candidates ahead of the election this month. The UK will continue to facilitate coordination between Peace and Security Commissioners in affected states and to help address violent crime by training peace ambassadors in Plateau State. Our High Commission is in regular contact with local leaders to promote tolerance and understanding between communities.

Nigeria: Christianity

09 Feb 2023 | 138069

Asked by: Alexander Stafford

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development

Affairs, what assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the abduction of Christians in Kaduna State, Nigeria on 25 December 2022.

Answering member: Mr Andrew Mitchell | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

We condemn all violence across Nigeria, including the recent kidnapping in Kaduna state and the murder of Fr. Isaac Achi in Niger state. Events such as these are occurring across Nigeria as conflict and insecurity rises. The Minister of State for Africa & Development recently discussed this challenge with some of Nigeria's leading presidential candidates, and with the Governor of Kaduna. The UK continues to support Nigeria to tackle this issue, and fulfil its constitutional commitment to Freedom of Religion or Belief, by strengthening military capabilities, human rights compliance, policing, and anti-kidnap capacity through our UK-Nigeria Security and Defence Partnership.

The UK Government continues to raise Mr Bala's case with the Nigerian authorities, most recently with the Kano State Government on 19 January.

Nigeria: Christianity

19 Jan 2023 | 123984

Asked by: Conor McGinn

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what representations he has made to his Nigerian counterpart on the persecution of Christians in that country.

Answering member: Mr Andrew Mitchell | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The UK Government is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief for all communities in Nigeria. In July 2022, at the UK's Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Nigerian High Commissioner reiterated his Government's commitment to freedom of religion or belief. I have raised concerns about the effect of insecurity on communities in my engagements with leading Nigerian presidential candidates in December 2022 and January 2023. We will continue to call on the Nigerian Government to assist affected communities and implement long-term solutions.

Nigeria

07 Dec 2022 | 826 cc174-7

Asked by: Baroness Cox

To ask His Majesty's Government what representations they have made to the government of Nigeria regarding the violent targeting of Christians, non-Islamist Muslims, and other minority faith and non-faith groups in that country, including reports of massacres, destructions of homes and clinics, forced displacement, and abductions.

Answered by: Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

My Lords, the UK Government believe that violence against any person because of their religion or belief is unacceptable. In Nigeria, attacks by terrorists and criminal gangs as well as localised community violence are having an unacceptable impact on people's lives. We regularly raise our concerns, including about the impact that violence is having on different faith and non-faith groups, with Nigeria's Ministers, state governors and security professionals. Through the UK-Nigeria security and defence partnership, we are committed to supporting Nigeria to improve security across the country and protect human rights.

6 Other Parliamentary material

6.1 Debates

Religious Persecution and the World Watch List

25 Jan 2024 | House of Commons | 744 cc187-210WH

Motion that this House has considered religious persecution and the World Watch List 2024. Agreed to on question.

Freedom of Religion and Belief

19 Sep 2023 | House of Commons | 737 cc453-476WH

Motion that this House has considered freedom of religion and belief. Agreed to on question.

Religious Minorities in Nigeria

18 Apr 2023 | House of Commons | 731 cc37-58WH

Motion that this House has considered religious minorities in Nigeria. Agreed to on question.

6.2 EDMs

Blasphemy laws in Nigeria

EDM 1200 (2022-23 session)

Jim Shannon

22 May 2023

That this House condemns the blasphemy laws in Nigeria that have caused individuals with minority beliefs to receive long prison sentences or extreme mob violence; urges President Buhari to pardon those facing the death penalty for alleged blasphemous expressions before he leaves office, including Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, whose case is currently before the Supreme Court; and extends its full support to Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, a 22 year old singer at risk of execution for circulating a song via WhatsApp considered blasphemous.

Father Achi of Saint Peter and Paul in Paikoro, Nigeria

EDM 765 (2022-23 session)

Jim Shannon

17 January 2023

The House extends its condolences to the family of Nigerian priest Father Isaac Achi, and to his parish of Saint Peter and Paul in Paikoro Nigeria; condemns in the strongest of terms the brutal murder of Fr Achi who was burned alive by armed terrorists on Sunday 15 January 2023; urges the government of Nigeria to address the deteriorating security situation in Nigeria as a matter of priority so that all faith and belief groups might enjoy freedom of religion or belief; and implores the government of Nigeria to ensure free and fair presidential elections next month, free from fear of armed terrorist groups.

7

Further reading

[World Watch List 2024: Nigeria](#), Open Doors, 17 January 2024

[Nigeria: Events of 2023](#), Human Rights Watch, World Report 2024

[Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide? Three years on](#), All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, July 2023

[Religious Freedom in the World Report 2023: Nigeria country report](#), Aid to the Church in Need [ACN] International, June 2023

[USCIRF 2023 Annual Report: Nigeria](#), United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 29 April 2023

[Religious persecution and the World Watch List 2024](#), Commons Library debate pack, CDP- 2024-0017, 23 January 2024

[The UK and Global Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), Commons Library research briefing, CBP-9849, 14 September 2023

[General debate on freedom of religion or belief](#), Commons Library debate pack, CDP-2023-0182, 8 September 2023

[Religious minorities in Nigeria](#), Commons Library debate pack, CDP-2023-0081, 19 April 2023

[Nigeria: 2023 presidential election](#), Commons Library research briefing, CBP-9738, 6 April 2023

[The Commonwealth and Human Rights](#), Commons Library research briefing, CBP-9492, 7 March 2023

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