Nigeria in Crisis: A Call to Action

Injustice and a lack of inclusive governance that falls along ethno-religious fault lines threatens the stability of Africa's most important nation.

Among the 25 most populous countries in the world, Nigeria ranks highest in religion-related social hostilities. These issues have combined to create one of the most neglected humanitarian crisis in the world today — a crisis that the global community ignores and underestimates at its own peril.

Nigeria is a land of unrealized potential, rich in natural resources. It is Africa's most populous country, is one of the largest economies, and sits strategically at the intersection of the North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite these strengths as a regional leader, Nigeria's ongoing religious tensions are underlying factors to more commonly recognized problems such as poverty, corruption, and virulent terrorist activity. These are taking Nigeria to a breaking point.

Situation: A Fragile and Complex Nation

Nigeria rarely makes international headlines. It is frequently eclipsed by stories of turmoil in the Middle East, human rights abuse in North Korea, or religious persecution in places like Pakistan and Burma. Yet among the world's next truly horrific conflagration has been forming in Nigeria. Consider these facts:

- Two of the world's top five deadliest terror networks — Boko Haram and Fulani extremists — operate with great intensity within Nigeria and are the largest among 35 other such groups/networks.
- Terrorism has caused more civilian deaths in Nigeria than war-torn Syria or Pakistan has experienced.
- Terrorism and ethno-religious violence within Nigeria have produced nearly 1.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) — whole villages have been decimated.
- Nigeria has the second highest number of refugees (upwards of 19,000 individuals) pouring into Europe from the Mediterranean Sea since January 2017.

Even with these statistics, the Nigerian government has been distracted by efforts to fully institutionalize democracy and reform its petroleum-dependent economy. Policy surrounding Fulani extremism in the Middle Belt is following similar patterns shown in the response to Boko Haram. Little has been done to address the escalating violence along ethnic *and* religious fault lines. The result is a state lacking a swift and consistent response to Fulani extremism and Boko Haram: they deny there is a problem, they misdiagnose the issues, and they violate human rights through poorly executed military strategy, rather than using appropriate police, judicial, and other justice institutions. Given these dynamics, violence and disruption continue throughout Nigeria.

Further eroding the government's credibility has been the resistance of Nigerian authorities to recognize and hold to account military officials responsible for human rights violations, seen horrifically in the massacre of hundreds of Shi'a Muslims in 2015. Combined with the Federal Government's

defying of the Supreme Court in the ongoing detention of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria's leader, conditions have left Nigeria's religious groups with little confidence that their government is committed to supporting the constitutional rights of its citizens, let alone is capable of ensuring the rule of law.

Nigeria's religious and ethnic violence does not stem alone from a simplistic narrative — namely a battle between the Muslim north and Christian south, for example. There are greater complexities in the region. Yet religion is central to how Nigerians understand themselves. As such, the meaningful protection of religious rights — through the rule of law and inclusive governance — will be critical for long-term stability in Nigeria.

Implications: Beyond Nigeria's Borders

Nigeria must find its equilibrium in short order, and not simply for the sake of its own internal stability. Nigeria's crisis is not Nigeria's alone. A destabilized and crisis-ridden Nigeria has negative impacts for American businesses, international security, and the stability of the entire region. The geopolitical consequences of an unstable Nigeria are dangerous and looming:

- Destabilization of Nigeria impacts neighboring countries; more than 300,000 displaced Nigerians are taking refuge in Cameroon, Chad and Niger. The entire region is in a state of emergency as it struggles with extreme food insecurity and suffers from violent terrorist attacks.
- Enormous numbers of Nigerians have sought protection in Europe from religious persecution. In 2016, more than 35,000 Nigerian refugees arrived in Italy via Libya, adding to an overwhelming humanitarian crisis triggered by the Syrian Civil War. In recent years, human trafficking of Nigerian women has become a massive criminal problem in Italy.
- Instability in Nigeria is a national security threat for the United States and other Western nations. While ISIS may be in retreat in the Middle East, it has found a new and powerful ally in Boko Haram, which is entrenched in northern Nigeria. Like Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria before it, an unstable Nigeria is becoming the new breeding ground for Islamist terrorists.
- Further, Nigeria is an important economic partner for the U.S. The U.S. is the largest foreign investor in Nigeria and Nigeria imports more than $5.5 billion U.S. originated goods per year.

Solutions: How U.S. Policy Can Help

Nigeria is at a critical point, which the United States cannot afford to ignore. Nigeria is the lynchpin of regional stability and a strategic partner with the U.S. in the struggle against extremism. Swift and precise policy decisions from the U.S., in partnership with Nigerian civil society, can have profound stabilizing effects.

Considering these challenges, we align with the U.S. Government's statement that all religious violence must stop. Therefore, we call for the following actions:

1. Security provided for all people, regardless of religious affiliation.
2. Perpetrators of the violence to be brought to justice.
3. Civil society empowered to stand together to confront atrocities and promote peace.