

NIGERIA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution bars the federal and state governments from adopting a state religion, prohibits religious discrimination, and provides for individuals' freedom to choose, practice, propagate, or change their religion. Members of the armed forces fired on Shia Muslims participating in the Arba'een Symbolic Trek organized by the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) on October 27, killing at least three persons, and again on October 29, killing 39 and injuring over 100, according to human rights organizations. The government reported it conducted an investigation into these incidents but did not release its findings publicly. The government did not keep its commitments to ensure accountability for soldiers implicated in the December 2015 clash between the army and IMN members that, according to a Kaduna State government report, left at least 348 IMN members and a soldier dead, with IMN members buried in a mass grave. On November 7, the Kaduna State High Court denied the bail request for the leader of the IMN Shia group, despite a December 2016 court ruling that the government should release him by January 2017. Authorities arrested a Christian man for inciting violence after attempting to convert a Muslim girl. A Muslim law graduate was called to the bar wearing her hijab after initially being denied. The federal government launched military operations in Middle Belt states with the stated aim of stemming resource-driven rural violence, which frequently played out along ethnic and religious lines. Members of regional minority religious groups continued to report some state and local government laws discriminated against them, including by limiting their rights to freedom of expression and assembly and in obtaining government employment.

Terrorist organizations Boko Haram and Islamic State-West Africa (ISIS-WA) continued to attack population centers and religious targets. On January 3, a Boko Haram suicide bomber attacked a Gambaru mosque, killing 14 and injuring 15. According to international news, on April 22, two suicide bombers killed three in a Bama, Borno State mosque. On May 1, twin suicide bombings in Mubi, one in a mosque and another in a market, killed at least 27 and injured more than 60 persons. According to Christian news outlets, on June 12, Boko Haram burned 22 buildings, including part of a Catechetical Training Center in Kaya, Adamawa State. On June 16, two Boko Haram suicide bombers attacked the town of Damboa, killing 31 persons returning from Ramadan celebrations on Eid al-Fitr. On July 23, a Boko Haram suicide bomber killed eight worshippers in a mosque in Mainari. Boko Haram also conducted limited attacks in Adamawa, while ISIS-

WA also attacked targets in Yobe. Although government intervention reduced the amount of territory these groups controlled, the two insurgencies maintained the ability to stage forces in rural areas and launch attacks against civilian and military targets across the Northeast.

There were incidents of violence reflecting tension between different ethnic groups involving predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and predominantly Christian farmers. Scholars and other experts assessed that ethnicity, politics, and increasing competition over dwindling land resources were among the drivers of the violence, but religious identity and affiliation were also factors. In January and May Fulani herders attacked several villages in northern Benue State, resulting in the deaths of more than 200, mostly Christian, Tiv farmers. During the year, clashes between farmers and herders in Adamawa and Taraba States resulted in more than 250 deaths. In June Fulani herders attacked several villages in Barkin Ladi Local Government Area (LGA) of Plateau State, killing approximately 200 ethnic Berom farmers. The following day, Berom youth set up roadblocks and killed dozens of Muslim passersby. In March the Nigerian Interreligious Council (NIREC), which includes the nation's most influential religious leaders and addresses interfaith collaboration, met for the first time in five years. In September religious leaders throughout the country met in Abuja to sign a peace pact and pledged to combat ethnoreligious divisions.

U.S. embassy and visiting U.S. government officials promoted religious freedom and interreligious tolerance in discussions throughout the year with government officials, religious leaders, and civil society organizations. The Ambassador and other senior embassy officials hosted interfaith dinners, participated in interfaith conferences, and conducted press interviews to promote interfaith dialogue. The embassy sponsored training sessions for journalists who report on ethnoreligious conflicts to help reduce bias in their reporting and prevent tensions from becoming further inflamed. The U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited Abuja, Kaduna, and Lagos to engage with relevant stakeholders and highlight U.S. government support for interfaith cooperation.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 203.5 million (July 2018 estimate). A 2012 survey by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life estimated the population to be 49.3 percent Christian and 48.8 percent Muslim, while the remaining 2 percent belong to other or no religions. Many individuals combine indigenous beliefs and practices with Islam or Christianity. A

2010 Pew report found 38 percent of the Muslim population self-identified as Sunni and 12 percent as Shia, with the remainder declining to answer or identifying as “something else” (5 percent) or “just a Muslim” (42 percent). Included among the Sunnis are several Sufi groups, including Tijaniyah and Qadiriyyah. There are also Izala (Salafist) minorities and small numbers of Ahmadi Muslims. Christian groups include evangelicals, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Baptists, Anabaptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Other groups include Jews, Baha’is, and individuals who do not follow any religion.

The Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri ethnic groups are most prevalent in the predominantly Muslim northern states. Significant numbers of Christians, including some Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri, also reside in the north. Christians and Muslims reside in approximately equal numbers in the central region and southwestern states, including Lagos, where the Yoruba ethnic group, whose members include both Muslims and Christians, predominates. In the southeastern states, where the Igbo ethnic group is dominant, Christian groups, including Catholics, Anglicans, and Methodists, constitute the majority. In the Niger Delta region, where the Ogoni and Ijaw ethnic groups predominate, Christians form a substantial majority, and a very small minority of the population is Muslim. Evangelical Christian denominations are growing rapidly in the central and southern regions. Ahmadi Muslims maintain a small presence in several cities, including Lagos and Abuja.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates neither the federal nor the state governments shall establish a state religion and prohibits discrimination on religious grounds. It provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to change one’s religion and to manifest and propagate religion “in worship, teaching, practice, and observance,” provided these rights are consistent with the interests of defense, public safety, order, morality, or health, and protecting the rights of others. The constitution also states it shall be the duty of the state to encourage interfaith marriages and to promote the formation of associations that cut across religious lines and promote “national integration.” It prohibits political parties that limit membership on the basis of religion or with names that have a religious connotation.

The constitution provides that, in addition to common law courts, states may establish courts based on sharia or customary (traditional) law. Sharia courts function in 12 northern states and the Federal Capital Territory. Customary courts function in most of the 36 states. The nature of a case and the consent of the parties usually determine what type of court has jurisdiction. The constitution specifically recognizes sharia courts for “civil proceedings”; they do not have the authority to compel participation, whether by non-Muslims or Muslims. At least one state, Zamfara, requires civil cases in which all litigants are Muslim be heard in sharia courts, with the option to appeal any decision to the common law court. Non-Muslims have the option to have their cases tried in the sharia courts if they wish.

The constitution is silent on the use of sharia courts for criminal cases. In addition to civil matters, sharia courts also hear criminal cases if both complainant and defendant are Muslim and agree to the venue. Sharia courts may pass sentences based on the sharia penal code, including for “*hudud*” offenses (serious criminal offenses with punishments prescribed in the Quran) that provide for punishments such as caning, amputation, and death by stoning. Defendants have the right to challenge the constitutionality of sharia criminal statutes through common law appellate courts. The highest appellate court for sharia-based decisions is the Supreme Court, staffed by common law judges who are not required to have any formal training in the sharia penal code. Sharia experts often advise them.

Kano and Zamfara’s state-sanctioned Hisbah Boards regulate Islamic religious affairs and preaching, distribute licenses to imams, and attempt to resolve religious disputes between Muslims in those states. The states of Bauchi, Borno, Katsina, and Yobe maintain state-level Christian and Muslim religious affairs ministries or bureaus with varying mandates and authorities, while many other state governors appoint interfaith special advisers on religious affairs.

To build places of worship, open bank accounts, receive tax exemptions, or sign contracts, religious groups must register with the Corporate Affairs Commission as an incorporated trustee, which involves submitting an application form, proof of public notice, a copy of the organization’s constitution, a list of trustees, and a fee of 20,000 naira (\$55).

Both federal and state governments have the authority to regulate mandatory religious instruction in public schools. The constitution states schools may not require students to receive religious instruction or to participate in or attend any religious ceremony or observance pertaining to any religion other than their own.

State officials and many religious leaders have stated students have the right to request a teacher of their own religious beliefs to provide an alternative to any instruction offered in a religion other than their own. The constitution also says no religious community will be prevented from providing religious instruction to students of that community in any place maintained wholly by that community.

Several states have laws requiring licenses for preachers, places of worship, and religious schools of registered religious groups. A Katsina State law establishes a board with the authority to regulate Islamic schools, preachers, and mosques, including issuing permits, suspending operations, and imprisoning or fining violators. The Katsina law stipulates a punishment of one to five years in prison and/or a fine of up to 500,000 naira (\$1,400) for operating without a license.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

As in previous years, international and domestic media reported significant violence against the IMN, the country's largest Shia organization, by security forces. According to media, on October 27, members of the armed forces fired on Shia Muslims participating in the Arba'een Symbolic Trek organized by the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) on October 27, killing at least three persons. IMN members marched from Suleja to Abuja for the Arba'een Symbolic Trek, marking the Shia Muslim commemoration of the end of the 40-day period following Ashura. The army released a statement saying the IMN had set up illegal roadblocks in Abuja, blocking the path of an army convoy transporting missiles. The army also said it met "resistance" from IMN members who attempted to steal missiles and threw stones and other objects. The army stated it opened fire in response, killing three civilians, while the IMN said 10 of its members died in the incident. On October 29, with IMN marchers confirmed by the press to be approaching the city along at least three major feeder thoroughfares, an additional clash occurred at a military checkpoint at the border between Nasarawa State and the Federal Capital Territory near Abuja, in which the army used live rounds to break up the crowd. Amnesty International Nigeria reported at least 39 deaths and numerous injuries among the marchers. The government reported it opened an internal investigation of this incident but did not publish its findings, and no military or police were held accountable. On December 17, the *New York Times* reported that video footage appeared to show armed forces members beating and shooting unarmed protesters. The video contained no evidence the soldiers were provoked.

The federal government continued to detain IMN leader Sheikh Ibrahim El Zakzaky despite a December 2016 court ruling the government should release him. Hundreds of IMN members regularly protested in Abuja against Zakzaky's continued detention. In April the Kaduna State government charged Zakzaky in state court with multiple felonies stemming from the death of the soldier in Zaria. The charges include culpable homicide, which can carry the death penalty. At year's end, the case was pending.

There were no reports of accountability for soldiers implicated in the December 2015 clash between the army and IMN members that, according to a Kaduna State government report, left at least 348 IMN members and one soldier dead, with IMN members buried in a mass grave. In July a Kaduna High Court dismissed charges of aiding and abetting culpable homicide against more than 80 IMN members. The Kaduna State government appealed the ruling, and at year's end the case remained pending. Approximately 100 additional IMN members remained in detention.

According to international media reports, on December 25, unidentified gunmen abducted two Catholic priests from St. Theresa's Catholic Church in Umueze Anam, Anambra State, as they were returning from an official function. Haruna Mohammed, the state's Police Public Relations Officer, said police secured their release on December 27.

Both Muslim and Christian groups again said there was a lack of just handling of their mutual disputes and inadequate protection by federal, state, and local authorities, especially in central regions, where there were longstanding, often violent, disputes among ethnic groups. In disputes between primarily Christian farmers and Muslim herders, herders stated they did not receive justice when their members were killed or their cattle stolen by farming communities, which they said caused them to carry out retaliatory attacks. Farmers stated security forces did not intervene when herdsmen attacked their villages.

In June the High Court in Yola, Adamawa State sentenced five men to death for killing a Fulani herdsman. Christian groups, including the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria and the Christian Association of Nigeria, criticized the ruling. They said the sentences highlighted the government's bias in dealing with communal violence, noting the five men convicted were Christians who killed a Muslim, but there were no similar convictions when Fulani herdsmen killed Christians.

In July the Nigeria Body of Benchers, a body that regulates legal practice in the country, admitted Firdaus Amasa to the Nigerian Bar Association. Amasa was denied participation in the call to the bar ceremony in December 2017 for refusing to remove her hijab, according to media reports. After nationwide criticism from Muslim associations, including the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), the body reversed its earlier decision.

According to international media, on November 13, the Lagos State government ordered the tutor-general and permanent secretaries and principals to permit use of the hijab in public schools immediately. According to the government, since the case of wearing hijabs was still pending in the Supreme Court, schools should revert to the status quo, allowing the use of hijabs with school uniforms.

In February the federal government launched Exercise Ayem Apatuma (Cat Race) to combat armed ethnoreligious conflict in Benue, Taraba, and Kogi States. In March the federal government sent security forces to halt the increasing rural violence occurring in several Middle Belt states, where several conflicts occurred between Muslim and Christian groups. In May the military launched Operation Whirl Stroke to increase security in Benue, Taraba, Nasarawa, and Zamfara States, where some of the ethnoreligious violence took place.

In July the Plateau Peacebuilding Agency organized a three-day peace and security summit, which included participation from religious leaders, traditional youth leaders, and female leaders, along with state government ministries and heads of the security agencies operating within the state. The summit's mission was to address ethnoreligious tensions and conflicts in the state and find a path towards sustainable peace. In August the Kaduna State Peace Commission inaugurated its committees in all 23 LGAs of the state. The committees in each LGA were to be comprised of traditional, religious, and youth leaders, who would cooperate on peacebuilding among ethnic and religious groups.

In August the Office of the Vice President (OVP) collaborated with the U.S. Institute for Peace, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), and the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) to organize a two-day Justice and Security National Dialogue (JSD). The event included government, military, paramilitary, traditional, and religious leaders, along with civil society organizations and representatives from farming and herding communities. The participants agreed to set up state-level JSD models developed during the event to manage ethnoreligious conflicts, as well as criminal activities, which sources stated often exacerbated conflicts. State-level stakeholders began preparing to set up the

models, and as of the end of the year, the state-level police commands had nominated officers to attend training in 2019 that is expected to be designed and conducted by the OVP, NHRC, and IPCR.

A pending bill in Kaduna State that would require all preachers to obtain preaching licenses or risk fines and/or imprisonment for up to two years was deferred indefinitely after widespread opposition from Muslim and Christian religious leaders.

Christian groups reported authorities in some northern states refused to respond to requests for building permits for minority religious communities for construction of new places of worship, expansion and renovation of existing facilities, or reconstruction of buildings that had been demolished. A Christian religious leader in Kano noted Christians could build churches freely in Sabon Gari, a part of town reserved for Christians, but only very old churches had valid permits; he added new permits had not been granted in decades.

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in Zamfara noted a case where a Christian businessman sold land and the certificate of occupancy to a Christian church during the year. The church attempted to register the sale with the state government, but the sale was not approved because, according to the church, the government was concerned it would build a church. CAN also said Christians in local communities in Zamfara occasionally did not inform the government when building a church because they feared the government would have it demolished. He noted some Muslim traditional rulers have also had difficulty getting the sales approved when they have sold land to Christian churches.

Muslim students at Rivers State University of Science and Technology continued to complain they were unable to construct a place of worship. In 2012 the university prevented Muslim students from constructing a mosque, leaving them with no place of worship. The Muslim students filed a suit against the university, and the court ruled in their favor, but the university had not granted them a license to build the mosque by year's end.

The Hisbah continued to arrest street beggars and prostitutes, and destroy confiscated bottles of alcohol. There were no reports of Christians being forced to use sharia courts. In January the Kano State Hisbah arrested 94 individuals who violated the law banning street begging, and in April the Hisbah received 36 cases of prostitution. In May Zamfara State signed a bill conferring more powers on the state Hisbah commission to interrogate and arrest individuals and to undertake

searches for evidence of anti-sharia activities or substances banned by sharia. In September the Kano State Hisbah stated it confiscated 12 million bottles of beer within the past seven years, including more than 17,000 confiscated in September. In April the Jigawa State Hisbah Board announced it had “saved” 4,000 marriages in the past two years by settling marriage disputes. According to international media, in December Hisbah arrested 11 women for planning a lesbian wedding in Kano. Director-General Abba Sufi stated “We can’t allow such despicable acts to find roots in our society. Both Islam and Nigerian laws prohibit same-sex relationships.”

Christian and Muslim groups continued to report that individual administrators of government-run universities and technical schools in several states refused to admit certain individuals or delayed the issuance of their degrees and licenses because of religion or ethnicity. A Christian pastor in Yobe said while Christians could gain entry into universities dominated by Muslims, they were relegated to the “lower” subjects and found it difficult to study for degrees in more desirable areas such as engineering, medicine, finance, and law. A Muslim leader in southern Kaduna stated all government positions in the region were reserved for Christians. He said Hausa and Fulani Muslims earned livelihoods predominantly in the private sector because there was no alternative. According to Christian and Muslim groups and NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, the issue was connected to the country’s indigene-settler conflict, whereby state governments granted benefits, such as access to government services, to ethnic groups considered to be indigenous to a particular state, and distinguished them from ethnic groups considered to be settlers, even if their families had lived in the state for generations. In certain states, especially in the Middle Belt, the divide between Christian indigenes and Muslim settlers was religious as well as ethnic and economic.

According to international reporting, on May 10, the Southern Kaduna Peace and Reconciliation Committee brought together security agencies in the state including police, army, civil defense, Department of State Security, and civil society, including religious leaders. In the previous two years, southern Kaduna had experienced large-scale ethnoreligious violence, and the event was organized to foster trust through dialogue between the religious communities and security agencies. Participants discussed the importance of resolving issues peacefully, how to focus on things the communities have in common instead of what divides them, and how security services could serve as assets in conflict mitigation.

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

Although the U.S.-designated terrorist organization Boko Haram split into two factions in 2016, one pledging allegiance to ISIS and calling itself ISIS-WA, headed by Abu Musab al Barnawi, and another headed by Abubakar Shekau and retaining the traditional Boko Haram name, Jama'atu Ahl as-Sunnah li-Da'awati wal-Jihad (JASDJ), most residents and government officials continued to refer to both groups collectively as Boko Haram.

Boko Haram and ISIS-WA attacked population centers and religious targets in Borno State. Boko Haram also conducted limited attacks in Adamawa, while ISIS-WA attacked targets in Yobe. While Boko Haram no longer controlled as much territory as it once did, the two insurgencies nevertheless maintained the ability to stage forces in rural areas and launch attacks against civilian targets across the Northeast.

Boko Haram continued to employ suicide bombings targeting the local civilian population, including places of worship. On January 3, a Boko Haram suicide bomber attacked a Gambaru mosque, killing 14 and injuring 15. According to international news, on April 22, two suicide bombers killed three in a Bama, Borno State mosque. On May 1, twin suicide bombings in Mubi, one in a mosque and another in a market, killed at least 27 and injured more than 60 persons. According to Christian news outlets, on June 12, Boko Haram burned 22 buildings, including part of a catechetical training center in Kaya, Adamawa state. On June 16, two Boko Haram suicide bombers attacked Damboa killing 31 persons returning from Ramadan celebrations on Eid al-Fitr. On July 23, a Boko Haram suicide bomber killed eight worshippers in a mosque in Mainari.

On September 8, ISIS-WA militants, in what was reported as an effort to spread its religious ideology, launched an attack lasting several hours on Gudumbali town in Guzamala LGA of Borno State, but security forces repelled them. According to estimates from the NGO Nigeria Watch, which did not appear to differentiate between Boko Haram and ISIS-WA, 1,911 persons, including Boko Haram members, died because of the group's activities during the year, compared with 1,749 killed in 2017.

Approximately half of the students abducted by Boko Haram from the Chibok Government Girls Secondary School in 2014 remained in captivity. In January the army reported the rescue of one girl in Borno State. On February 19, ISIS-WA abducted 111 girls from the town of Dapchi, Yobe State. According to press reports, five of the girls died during the abduction, while 105 were released on

March 22 for unknown reasons. Leah Sharibu remained with the insurgents, reportedly because she refused to convert to Islam from Christianity. All other abductees were Muslims. The CAN reported more than 900 churches were destroyed by Boko Haram in the Northeast since the insurgency began in 2010.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Numerous fatal clashes occurred throughout the year in the central Middle Belt region between predominantly Christian farmers from various ethnic groups and predominantly Fulani Muslim herders. Scholars and other experts assessed ethnicity, politics, and increasing competition over dwindling land resources because of population growth, soil degradation, and internal displacement from other forms of violence and criminality occurring in the north were among the drivers of the violence, but religious identity and affiliation were also factors. According to international news reports, on April 24, Fulani herdsmen killed 17 worshippers and two priests during a Mass in Mbalom, Benue State. The reports also stated local youth engaged in reprisal attacks and killed nine persons in Muslim Hausa settlements and raided two mosques. According to international media, on May 28, herdsmen beat two priests and shot another in the leg in Jalingo, Taraba State.

In January and May Fulani herdsmen attacked several villages in Guma, Logo, Gwer East, and Gwer West LGAs in Benue State, killing more than 200 ethnic Tiv Christians. The Benue government said the attackers were headquartered in neighboring Nasarawa State, where most Fulani herdsmen fled after Benue State began enforcing the ban on open grazing in November 2017. The Nasarawa government rejected the claim, stating the situation was caused by the implementation of Benue's anti-grazing law and that Nasarawa was hosting more than 7,000 IDPs from Benue State.

From the beginning of the year, clashes between Fulani herdsmen and ethnic, primarily Christian, Bachama, Nyandan, and Mumuye farmers in Adamawa and Taraba States resulted in more than 250 deaths. The conflict began after a Bachama farmer was found dead on his farm in Numan LGA, Adamawa State in November 2017, and followed by a reprisal attack on a Fulani settlement, killing more than 50 persons. That attack was followed by a series of reprisals by the Bachama in Numan and the Fulanis who fled to neighboring Demsa LGA, and then into Lau LGA of Taraba State. Cross-border attacks continued throughout the year, including a September 15 attack by Fulani herdsmen on villages in Numan LGA, resulting in more than 50 deaths.

On June 23, Fulani herdsmen attacked several villages in Barkin Ladi LGA, Plateau State, killing approximately 200 Berom Christians. According to international news reports, the following day Berom youth in Barkin Ladi, Riyom, and Jos South set up roadblocks and killed dozens of travelers who appeared to be Muslim. The state government imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew in the three affected LGAs. The impetus for the initial attack was reported to have been a series of incidents between the Fulani and Berom communities that resulted in the deaths of some members on both sides and the theft of some cattle. In the midst of the June 23 attacks in Barkin Ladi, Imam Abdullahi Abubakar sheltered his Christian neighbors in his home and in the mosque while confronting the attackers, and he refused to allow them entry.

On October 18, ethnoreligious riots broke out in the town Kasuwan Magani in Kajuru LGA, Kaduna State, resulting in 55 deaths and 22 arrests. The state government imposed a 24-hour curfew on the town, which it lifted on December 21. On October 24, Kaduna State representatives from CAN and Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI), the Islamic umbrella organization, held a joint press conference in Kasuwan Magani to condemn the violence, call for peace and calm, and urge the government to investigate the incident. On October 30, the Secretary General of the JNI, Dr. Khalid Aliyu, the Kaduna State Chairman of CAN, Bishop George Dodo, and the Emir of Zazzau, Chairman of the Kaduna State traditional council, Dr. Shehu Idris, held a press conference and said the authorities must investigate pastors and imams who preach hate and division.

In August authorities in Yobe State arrested a Hausa Christian convert after he proselytized to, and converted, a 19-year old Muslim woman. According to a Christian pastor with knowledge of the situation, the woman converted back to Islam after pressure from her mother and the community, and she and her mother brought a case against the Christian man. He was charged in customary court with unlawful trespassing and instigating violence. Initially, the police refused to release him on bail, reportedly because of fear the youth in the community would harm him; however, he was released in September and awaited trial at year's end. In October local Muslim youth in Bungudu LGA beat and hospitalized a Hausa Christian convert. The Hausa man converted from Islam to Christianity in 2017 and was sent to Jos after threats against him. He was attacked after returning home for a visit in October 2018. The CAN worked with Muslim traditional and religious leaders to calm the situation and clarify that all Nigerians are free to choose their religion.

On March 22, the NIREC, the highest interreligious body in the country, met for the first time in five years. The Sultan of Sokoto and president of CAN cochaired the NIREC; council members included 50 of the highest-ranking Muslim and 25 Christian religious leaders in the country. Christian and Muslim religious leaders discussed the necessity of a functioning NIREC in fostering peaceful coexistence in the country, and stressed they must continue to engage in dialogue no matter how difficult their problems became. NIREC met again on November 21 to plan engagement regarding the February 2019 national elections.

On November 24, NIREC Youth organized a summit bringing together 250 Muslim and Christian youth leaders in Abuja for training on peace messaging and encouraged youth leaders not to allow religious or community leaders to encourage them to resort to violence, especially in areas where parties may be associated with a particular religion, during the upcoming national elections. The event also included 50 NIREC religious leaders and presentations by the sultan and CAN president.

On September 18, the Nigerian Interfaith Action Association organized a national peace summit, at which Christian and Muslim religious leaders signed a peace pact. CAN President Samson Ayokunle, represented by Prelate of the Methodist Church Reverend Samuel Uche, and Sultan of Sokoto Sa'ad Abubakar III, represented by Emir of Keffi Dr. Shehu Chindo-Yamusa, were signatories. The religious leaders pledged not to use religion to promote conflict and violence, to denounce hate speech and violence, and to promote peace and understanding throughout their communities.

On November 19, University of Ibadan International School shut down as members of the Muslim Parents Forum protested a restriction prohibiting their daughters from wearing the hijab in the school. On November 21, Concerned Parents of Students of the International School, University of Ibadan, held a counterprotest and argued the Muslim Parents Forum was fostering disunity and religious strife. After a week of closure, the school's board announced it would resume classes on November 26, and the students must comply with the status quo dress code (no hijab), adding parents must go through the proper process to change the dress code.

On May 22, Catholic bishops led nationwide protests over the April attacks in Benue and the government's inability to hold accountable those responsible for farmer-herder violence. The protests took place the same day the two priests and 17 worshippers were buried.

In May the Church of the Brethren hosted an Interfaith Peace Conference in Yola, Adamawa State, to discuss peaceful messaging at religious services, elections, and countering violent extremism.

On January 19, Muslim and Christian women under the auspices of the Interfaith Council of Women Associations met in southern Kaduna to observe a day of prayer for an end to the violence affecting their communities.

On November 13, Emir of Kano Muhammadu Sanusi II called on the government to enact legislation to regulate preaching in the country. He made the call during a three-day conference on the Boko Haram insurgency organized by the Center for Islamic Civilization and Interfaith Dialogue at Bayero University in Kano.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials and visiting U.S. government officials promoted religious freedom and interreligious tolerance in discussions throughout the year with government officials, including the vice president, secretary to the government of the federation, governors, and national assembly members. The Ambassador and other senior embassy officials hosted interfaith dinners, participated in interfaith conferences, and conducted press interviews to promote interfaith dialogue. The embassy sponsored training sessions for journalists that emphasized ways to report on ethnoreligious conflicts without further inflaming the situations.

In March the Ambassador participated in the reconvening of NIREC. In his remarks, he highlighted the significance of the leaders coming together at a time when rural violence appeared to be dividing the nation along ethnic and religious lines. The Ambassador also hosted a number of interfaith dinners bringing together Muslim and Christian religious leaders, NGOs, and journalists to encourage interfaith dialogue.

The Ambassador and other senior embassy officials participated in multiple interfaith conferences and summits throughout the year encouraging religious, traditional, government, and community leaders to continue to dialogue and work towards sustainable peace. They also spread this messaging in media interviews during multiple trips to states affected by ethnoreligious conflict, including Kaduna, Plateau, Benue, Taraba, and Adamawa States.

In July and August a senior embassy official made three visits to Jos after deadly ethnoreligious attacks claimed the lives of more than 200 persons. During the trips, he visited two of the affected villages and participated in a state-level interfaith summit that included Muslim and Christian religious leaders, traditional leaders, NGOs, and security and government personnel. He also conducted media interviews expressing condolences to the victims and stressing the importance of dialogue in resolving conflict.

The embassy hosted a number of training sessions in Abuja and Jos for journalists who report on ethnoreligious conflicts to increase professionalism and reduce bias in reporting on sensitive matters. The embassy also funded peacebuilding programs in conflict-prone states, such as Kaduna, Plateau, and Nasarawa. The programs were designed to train farming and herding communities, including traditional, youth, religious, and female leaders, to build mechanisms to resolve tensions before they became violent conflicts.

In June the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom visited Abuja, Kaduna, and Lagos, engaging with government and religious leaders as well as NGOs to highlight U.S. support for interfaith cooperation in the country and to encourage greater efforts to combat ethnoreligious violence. The Ambassador at Large met with the deputy governor of Kaduna State, the vice president, the governors of Benue and Taraba States, the Catholic Archbishop of Abuja, and the head imam of the National Mosque.

The U.S. Consul General in Lagos continued to discuss religious tolerance and interfaith relationship building with a wide range of religious leaders.