

NIGERIA 2017 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. Human rights groups continued to report the federal government often failed to prevent, quell, or respond to violence affecting religious groups, particularly in the northeastern and central regions of the country. In November Kano State police fired tear gas and bullets, killing three members of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) during its annual Ashura procession. The government continued to detain the leader of the IMN, the country's largest Shia group, and restrict the activities, free movement, and free association of its members. 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 and reports from nongovernment observers, left at least 348 IMN members and one soldier dead, with IMN members buried in a mass grave. A pending bill in Kaduna State would require all preachers to obtain preaching licenses or risk fines and/or imprisonment for up to two years. The draft generated widespread opposition from both Muslim and Christian groups, who cited fears that such steps would lead to broader government restrictions on religious organizations and general religious activity. Members of regional minority religious groups said some state and local government laws continued to discriminate against them, including by limiting their rights to freedom of expression and assembly and obtaining government employment.

The terrorist organization Boko Haram and its splinter organization the Islamic State-West Africa (ISIS-WA) continued carrying out numerous attacks, committing mass killings, and targeting civilians. Nigeria Watch estimated activities by Boko Haram and ISIS-WA resulted in the deaths of 1,794 persons during the year, including members of the two groups, a decrease from the 2,900 deaths recorded in 2016. According to media reports, in September members of Boko Haram killed Chief Imam Ustaz Goni Bukar Tabare and four people in Magumeri, Borno State.

There were incidents of killings and other violence which observers stated were motivated in part by religion, although they said there were other contributing factors, including ethnicity, corruption, criminality, and conflict over grazing rights. In Kaduna State clashes between mainly Christian farmers from various

ethnic groups and mainly Muslim Fulani herders in January, February, and July resulted in the deaths of dozens of persons. In June ethnic Mambilla tribesmen in Taraba State attacked dozens of Fulani settlements, resulting in the deaths of dozens of individuals. In September Fulani herdsmen attacked villages in Plateau state, killing 19 persons.

Embassy officials met with Vice President Yemi Osinbajo, state governors, National Assembly leaders, and other senior federal and state government officials to discuss religious freedom and tolerance, and encouraged them to address interreligious violence and take timely legal action against perpetrators of violence. In meetings with leaders of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Jama'atu Nasril Islam, the national Islamic umbrella organization, to discuss religious freedom, embassy officers affirmed U.S. support for efforts to combat Boko Haram and ISIS-WA and reviewed efforts to improve relations between Christians and Muslims throughout the country. In April the embassy sponsored a conference that brought together farmers and pastoralists from 16 states and discussed triggers of violence, including religious triggers.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 190.6 million (July 2017 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, Methodists, Presbyterians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses. Other groups include Jews, Bahais, 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, and Christians and Muslims reside in approximately equal numbers in the central part of the country and in the 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 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 for state-level courts based on common or customary law systems, which have operated in the region for centuries. It specifically recognizes sharia courts of appeal in any states that require it, with jurisdiction over civil proceedings such as marriage, inheritance, and other family matters, where all the parties are Muslims. Sharia courts hear criminal cases in 12 northern states. State laws on sharia criminal courts vary, but at least one state, Zamfara, requires that criminal cases in which all litigants are Muslim be heard in sharia courts. According to state laws, sharia courts may pass sentences based on the sharia penal code, including *hudood* offenses (serious criminal offenses with punishments prescribed in the Quran) and prescribe punishments, such as caning, amputation, and death by stoning. State laws dictate non-Muslims have the option to try their cases in sharia courts if involved in civil or criminal disputes with Muslims. Common law courts hear the cases of non-Muslims and Muslims (in states where they have the option) who choose not to use sharia courts. Sharia courts do not have the authority to compel participation by non-Muslims. Aggrieved parties

may appeal sharia court judgments to three levels of sharia appellate courts. According to the constitution, decisions by the state sharia courts of appeal (the highest level of the sharia courts) theoretically can be appealed to the Federal Court of Appeal and then to the Supreme Court, although none have been.

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.

In order 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 (\$56).

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

Summary Paragraph: In November Kano State police fired tear gas and bullets, killing three members of the IMN during its annual Ashura procession. The government continued to detain Sheikh Ibraheem El-Zakzaky, leader of the IMN, the largest Shia Muslim group in the country, despite a court order that he be released by January 15. 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. Some Christian groups reported a lack of protection by government authorities for churches and Christian communities, especially in the central and northern regions. They reported discrimination in acquiring land permits to build churches and in admission to universities in the north. Muslims living in predominantly Christian states reported discrimination by state governments against such practices as women wearing the hijab. There were continued conflicts between migrant ethnic groups, known as settlers, who were mainly Muslim, and longstanding residents or indigenes, who were mainly Christian, which the groups accused the federal government of ignoring. Farmer-herder violence remained a form of the indigene-settler conflict, since herders were generally not seen as indigenous to the land by farmers. The differences between the indigenes and settlers were frequently religious as well as ethnic and economic. State governments often granted preferential treatment, for example in access to education and jobs, to indigenes over settlers.

According to international reports, on November 5, Kano State police fired tear gas and bullets, killing three IMN members during the group's annual Ashura procession. Police arrested 10 members. The police spokesperson stated the IMN ignored instructions from police not to hold the procession.

The government stated publicly that Sheikh Zakzaky, leader of the IMN and a prominent Shia cleric, would remain in what it said was "protective custody" pending appeal of the December 2016 decision of Federal High Court in Abuja that the government must release him. At year's end, Zakzaky remained in prison. The court also ruled the government must provide him with a house and pay him and his wife restitution of 25 million naira (\$69,600) by January 15; at year's end, the court's order had yet to be followed.

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. Dozens of IMN members were still being held since December 2015, charged with the

death of the soldier. In August Acting President Osinbajo announced the creation of a Presidential Investigative Panel that committed to transparently and credibly investigating human rights abuses committed by the military. On August 17, the IMN publicly stated it would boycott the panel because it doubted the panel's sincerity. Outside human rights observers also expressed concern over lack of transparency and rigor of the panel. At year's end, the panel's findings were not yet available.

According to local media reports, the 23rd Armored Brigade of the Nigerian Army in Yola, Adamawa State, began an investigation into the disruption of an Assemblies of God church service in March by men in military uniforms but without nametags. Media reported the church had been affected by a leadership crisis, and a clergy member representing a rival faction in the leadership struggle reportedly invited the soldiers to enter the church and remove the presiding pastor. An army spokesperson stated that the army sent no personnel to the church and would investigate whether the attackers were in fact soldiers.

Both Muslim and Christian groups 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, violent disputes between Hausa and Fulani Muslims and Christian 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 the farming community, which they said caused them to carry out retaliatory attacks. Farmers stated security forces did not intervene when their villages were being attacked by herdsmen.

A pending bill in Kaduna State would require all preachers to obtain preaching licenses or risk fines and/or imprisonment for up to two years. The bill was introduced in 2016 in the state legislature and remained pending at year's end. Deputy Governor of Kaduna State Barnabas Bala said the bill was proposed to protect the state from religious extremism and hate speech. The bill would also restrict playing religious recordings at certain times and places as well as prohibit "abusive" religious speech, which it did not define further. The draft bill generated widespread opposition from both Muslim and Christian groups, who cited fears that such steps would lead to broader government restrictions on religious organizations and general religious activity.

The media regularly reported on claims by Christian leaders and organizations that northern leaders, backed by the federal government, were engaged in an effort to

Islamize the country. In September Caritas Nigeria stated a bill to regulate nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) would give the federal government authority to regulate churches, which are registered as incorporated trustees and thus fall under the category of NGO, and thereby provide the government authority to restrict the activity of churches and promote Islam. The National Assembly member who introduced the bill responded that the bill's intent was to ensure transparency and accountability in the way NGOs collected and used funds, and he said the bill would not affect mosques or churches. Also in September, CAN reported that the federal government's proposal to issue Sukuk bonds, an Islamic financial certificate, was in violation of the country's secular constitution and an attempt to Islamize the country. The minister of information responded that the Sukuk bond issuance was an attempt at financial inclusiveness, and the difference between a Sukuk bond and other bonds was that Sukuk bonds paid no interest.

In December BBC and other media reported that Amasa Firdaus, a law graduate from Ilorin University, was denied admission to the "call to bar" ceremony because she wore a hijab to the ceremony in what her law school said was violation of its dress code.

Christian groups reported authorities in northern states continued to deny building permits to minority religious communities for the construction of new places of worship, expansion, and renovation of existing facilities, or reconstruction of buildings that had been demolished. Christian religious leaders in Adamawa complained that Christians in Yola, Adamawa State, could not obtain permits to purchase land for churches. They said that Christians built the churches anyway, but remained vulnerable when governments decided to demolish them, such as what occurred in Jigawa State. In January the Jigawa State government demolished churches belonging to the Redeemed Christian Church of God and the Lord Chosen God in the state capital, Dutse. The state government said the churches were built illegally and the churches had been given three notices to stop development. CAN said the churches did not receive a response from the government for their land permit application. In Ekiti State in April, the state government was reportedly prepared to demolish a mosque in the state capital, Ado Ekiti. After protests, the governor and Muslim leaders in the state were able to reach an agreement, and the government allowed the mosque to remain, despite not having a permit.

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.

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. For example, in Borno State, Christian religious leaders said it is very difficult for Christians to be admitted into certain schools at the University of Maiduguri, especially medicine and engineering, where Muslims make up over 90 percent of the student body. They also stated that Christianity was not offered for the religious studies courses in many public schools in Maiduguri and northern Borno, only Islam. Muslim leaders in Jos, Plateau State, complained that local governments in Plateau discriminated against Muslim residents regarding land purchases, admittance to universities, and access to government jobs. 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.

In February the Kwara State government hosted an international conference on security and peaceful coexistence, which included Muslim and Christian religious leaders. During his remarks, the Sultan of Sokoto, Sa'ad Abubakar, the spiritual leader of Muslims in Nigeria, said "God did not make a mistake when he created us as Nigerians and put us together. We must understand that and all of us who profess to be Christians or Muslims have a guide which is either the Quran or Bible. In these two major religions there is nowhere where killing of innocent people is allowed." In July more than 480 participants, including the Army Special Task Force, local government officials, and Christian and Muslim community leaders, met in Kafanchan to discuss establishing peace in the area and address grievances of victims of the communal violence. In January the governments of Nasarawa and Benue States worked together to enact a peace agreement between predominantly Muslim herdsmen and predominantly Christian farmers in Agatu, Benue State, after the January 2016 attack on the Christian community by herdsmen left more than 300 farmers dead.

According to press reports, in April Senate President Bukola Saraki stated: "...whatever laws we pass here, will be respectful to the religious beliefs of our people. We will not do anything that will in anyway go against that."

Abuses by Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors

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

Boko Haram and ISIS-WA continued to attack population centers and security personnel in the states of Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe. Vulnerable populations, notably those perceived as disagreeing with the groups' political or religious beliefs or those perceived as interfering with their access to resources, were targeted by the groups. There were multiple reports of Boko Haram killing scores of unarmed civilians. On November 21, Boko Haram blew up a mosque in Mubi, Adamawa State, resulting in the deaths of 50 worshippers.

While Boko Haram no longer controlled as much territory as it once did, the two insurgencies maintained the ability to stage forces in rural areas and launched attacks against civilian and military targets across the Northeast. On November 25, ISIS-WA militants launched an attack on Magumeri town in Magumeri local government area of Borno State, but security forces were able to repel them. From these areas of influence, the groups were still capable of carrying out complex attacks on military positions, and they deployed large numbers of roadside improvised explosive devices. According to estimates from NGO Nigeria Watch, which did not appear to differentiate between Boko Haram and ISIS-WA, 1,794 persons, including Boko Haram members, died as a result of the group's activities during the year, compared with 2,900 killed in 2016. The Adamawa State chapter of the country's Muslim Council reported that Boko Haram killed more than 5,247 Muslims since 2013 in Adamawa State. According to reports, Boko Haram killed more than 500 Catholics in Borno State since the insurgency began.

Approximately half of the students abducted by Boko Haram from the Chibok Government Girls Secondary School in 2014 remained in captivity. The government successfully negotiated the release of 82 of the kidnapped students in May, in addition to the 21 students released in October 2016. According to media reports, in September members of Boko Haram killed Chief Imam Ustaz Goni Bukar Tabare and four other individuals in Magumeri, Borno State. CAN reported

more than 900 churches were destroyed by Boko Haram in the northeast since the insurgency began.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Summary paragraph: There were incidents of killings and other forms of violence between members of different religious groups. Many killings occurred between farmers and herders in the central Middle Belt region, where farmers are predominantly Christian and from various ethnic groups, and herders are predominantly Fulani Muslims. This violence included religious differences as a factor, according to scholars and other experts, but also involved ethnicity, politics, and increasing competition over dwindling land resources as a result of population growth, soil degradation, and internal displacement from other forms of violence and criminality occurring in the north. Participants at an April conference identified 13 triggers to farmer-herder conflicts and offered recommendations for peace. Among these triggers of violence was incitement by religious leaders and inaccurate reporting by media, which tended to divide religious communities. Among the solutions identified was to increase interfaith dialogue and initiate sensitization programs. Media reported on claims by Christian groups that northern leaders were engaged in an agenda to Islamize the country. For example, the National Christian Elders Forum issued a communique in July warning of jihad and “brazen” attempts at Islamizing the country. At a CAN-sponsored meeting of Christian leaders in November, participants issued a resolution calling for the National Assembly to withdraw the country from the Organization of Islamic Countries and other Islamic organizations.

On December 22, gunmen suspected of being Fulani herdsmen opened fire on a congregation, killing four and injuring 10 in Nindem, Kaduna State. A report from the Fulani community in southern Kaduna, however, said the attack in Nindem was not perpetrated by Fulani, but was possibly a conflict within the Nindem community. On December 24, a suspected Fulani herdsman attacked a village, Ungwan Mailafiya, in Jema’a Local Government Area and killed six persons. The same Fulani community source said the attack in Ungwan Mailafiya may have been carried out by a Fulani man whose son was killed in the village by local persons. He said authorities were still looking for the man.

On January 21, unknown gunmen opened fire on a Fulani settlement in Kaura Local Government Area of southern Kaduna, killing a pastoralist, 13-year old Yahaya Musa. In retaliation, on February 20 Fulani herdsmen attacked and killed 31 individuals in villages in the same area. In another attack later that day,

suspected Fulani herdsmen attacked Zunuruk village in the same area, but were repelled by local residents, resulting in the death of some of the attackers. On February 21, a clash broke out between ethnic Hausa (predominantly Muslim) and Kanikon residents of Kafanchan, the largest city in southern Kaduna, when both groups went to claim dead bodies at the morgue, resulting in a number of deaths, including of two policemen. Some Kanikon residents reportedly assumed the Hausa residents came to claim the bodies of the attackers who were killed in the previous day's violence. On February 22, police deployed a team of special forces to the troubled area.

According to media reports, on April 15, 12 worshippers died and many more were injured in Asso village in Kaduna state when Fulani herdsmen opened fire on an Easter Vigil service. Media said the attackers boasted about disrupting the Easter celebration.

From June 17-20, ethnic Mambilla residents of the Mambilla Plateau of Taraba State attacked dozens of Fulani settlements throughout the plateau, killing dozens of Fulanis and hundreds of cattle. On June 21, Acting President Osinbajo sent in troops to restore order. Thousands of Fulani residents of the Mambilla Plateau fled into neighboring Cameroon to seek refuge. On July 4, CAN and the Muslim Council of Nigeria brought leaders of the two communities together in a reconciliation summit, but the Fulani leaders walked out and vowed not to engage in reconciliation until those involved in the attacks were brought to justice.

From July 15-17, ethnic Fulani herdsmen and Kadara local residents clashed in Kajuru in Kaduna State, resulting in the deaths of 27 Fulani and six Kadara individuals. Media reports said the clash was the result of an incident days before when Kadara youths killed a Fulani boy who was considered to be a bandit engaged in criminal activities in the area. Fulani youths then reportedly in revenge killed six Kadara youths who were allegedly involved in the initial killing. Immediately after, Kadara youths attacked several Fulani settlements, burning tents and killing approximately 17 Fulanis. Security officials arrived to restore calm soon after, but when they departed, Kadara youths attacked other Fulani settlements and killed an estimated 10 persons. Acting President Yemi Osinbajo ordered additional security reinforcements to the area.

On September 8, Fulani herdsmen attacked villages in Bassa, Plateau State, killing 19 ethnic Irigwe residents, who are mainly Christian, and injuring five. The Plateau State commissioner of police said the attack was in retaliation for the killing of a Fulani boy on August 3. President Muhammadu Buhari condemned

the attack, and the government sent a military task force to provide security to the affected community. On September 11, military personnel repelled another attack by Fulani gunmen, killing five. On November 20, ethnic Bachama local residents, who are predominantly Christian, killed more than 50 predominantly Fulani pastoralists in Numan Local Government Area of Adamawa State. The victims were women and children as the attack was carried out while the men were either in town or grazing cattle. The attack was in retaliation for the killing of a Bachama farmer by an unknown gunman, whom local residents suspected of being a Fulani herdsman.

In July a female suicide bomber killed eight individuals and wounded 18 before morning prayer at a mosque in Maiduguri. In January authorities thwarted a suicide bombing near a mosque in Maiduguri when, according to reports, a civilian self-defense force member stopped the bomber from reaching the mosque. Both died in the ensuing explosion.

In June traditional religious practitioners, known as masquerades, attacked a mosque in Moba Local Government Area of Ekiti State, injuring five worshippers, including the imam. The masquerades warned the Muslims against conducting their prayer service while the traditionalists were engaged in their festival, called *Egungun*.

A Lagos-based NGO, Muslim Rights Concern, said Muslim female students were not allowed to wear the hijab at Adeleke University in Osun State and Afe Babalola University in Ekiti State, both private universities.

According to international reports, in Kaduna State members of the IMN visited three churches to celebrate Christmas with Christians. The IMN advocated for religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence during the visits.

Many religious leaders publicly supported tolerance and interfaith cooperation to resolve conflicts. In January the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue hosted a two-day conference on inclusive and sustainable interreligious dialogue. At the conference, the Sultan of Sokoto condemned what he said was increased hate preaching in the country.

In January religious and political leaders conducted a peace and reconciliation mission to southern Kaduna in an effort to stem the violence between mainly Christian farmers and mostly Muslim herders. The delegation included former Head of State General Abdulsalami Abubakar, Cardinal John Onaiyekan, Bishop

Matthew Kukah, and Sultan of Sokoto Sa'ad Abubakar. General Abubakar said there is no religion that preaches violence, and criminals must be brought to justice to ensure peace.

In January 100 Christian and Muslim religious leaders came together to found the Interfaith Dialogue Forum for Peace (IDFP), a forum of Christian and Muslim representatives to address emerging interfaith issues, primarily in the troubled areas of Kaduna, Plateau, Yobe, Taraba, Borno and Adamawa States. The religious leaders selected Sultan of Sokoto Sa'ad Abubakar and Chairman of CAN Samson Ayokunle to head the IDFP. Its board of trustees includes eminent religious and traditional rulers from throughout the country.

On national hijab day on February 1, a coalition of women's groups held a press conference in Alausa, in which the women discussed wearing of the hijab as their inalienable constitutional right that must always be protected by the government through laws.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy staff and visiting U.S. government officials promoted religious freedom and tolerance in discussions throughout the year with government officials, religious leaders, and civil society organizations. In February the Ambassador met with the minister of foreign affairs to express U.S. support for efforts to strengthen religious freedom and combat violent extremism, especially in the northeast. In March the Ambassador met with the Governor of Plateau State to discuss his efforts to foster peace and build trust between Muslim and Christian communities after years of intense ethnoreligious conflicts. In August a U.S. embassy official hosted a meeting for officials from the ministries of agriculture and interior, the national police, military, and the Senate and House of Representatives to discuss recommendations to reduce farmer-herder violence in the country. In October the Ambassador met with the Governor of Kano State to discuss efforts to combat violent extremism.

In January the embassy hosted a roundtable discussion with Muslim and Christian religious leaders to reiterate U.S. support for religious freedom and encourage greater interfaith coordination between leaders of the two faiths in order to strengthen unity in the country. In February the Ambassador met with the president of CAN to encourage continued efforts at interfaith dialogue between the Christian and Muslim communities. In April the embassy sponsored a farmer-herder conference that brought together farmers and pastoralists at the community

level from 16 states, who discussed triggers of violence, including religious triggers. In August the Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials held a roundtable discussion with religious leaders, including members of CAN and the Jama'atu Nasril Islam, the Islamic umbrella association, to assure U.S. support for interfaith efforts aimed at resolving tensions between religious communities.

In November the Deputy Secretary of State met with Muslim and Christian religious leaders to express U.S. support for interfaith cooperation and encourage greater efforts.

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