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Attacks on Christians: UK MPs seek sanctions against Nigeria

By Clifford Ndujihe

Vanguard (07.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3bnH3DV> - Some members of United Kingdom House of Lords have asked the UK to take more action against Nigeria to check the rising killings of Christians by terrorists and state actors in parts of the West African country.

In a letter to Dominic Raab, MP, UK's Foreign Secretary, House of Commons, London, they lamented that the attacks led by Islamist militia continue in northern states and the Middle Belt, with almost-daily reports of killings, mayhem, rape and sexual abuse, abductions and enslavement, mass forced displacement and land-grabs.

The key signatories to the letter are David Patrick Paul Alton, the Lord Alton of Liverpool, a Liberal Democratic member of UK Parliament; Caroline Annex Cox, a cross-bench member of the UK House of Lords; and Sam Mason. They are also prominent members of the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Belief as well as key members of Jubilee Campaign International, an Int'l anti-religious persecution campaign group featuring prominent world religious and political leaders including former Nigeria President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo and past Archbishops of Canterbury UK All-Party Parliamentary Group For International Freedom of Religion or Belief.

They said: "We write following the publication of a new report by Nigerian human rights group, Intersociety (December 14, 2020), which raises serious concerns about the scale of human rights abuses in Nigeria and the need for an urgent response.

"Attacks led by Islamist militia continue in northern states and the Middle Belt, with almost-daily reports of killings, mayhem, rape and sexual abuse, abductions and enslavement, mass forced displacement and land-grabs. According to Intersociety, an estimated 34,400 Christians have been killed in Nigeria since 2009 – including 17,000 by Boko Haram (and its splinter groups) and 15,500 by Fulani militia.

"Reports consistently showed that in Nigeria, month after month, on average of hundreds of Christians were being killed for reasons connected with their faith. Those worst affected included Christian women and girls abducted, and forced to convert, enter forced marriages, sexual abuse and torture," they said.

"The same concerns were raised in two other recent reports: 'Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?' by the APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief; and 'Nigeria's Silent Slaughter: Genocide in Nigeria and the Implications for the International Community,' by the International Committee on Nigeria and the International Organisation on Peace-building and Social Justice.

"The ICC's decade-long preliminary investigation (which concluded December 11, 2020) found that Nigerian security forces have committed crimes against humanity and war crimes, including: murder, rape, torture, and cruel treatment; enforced disappearance; forcible transfer of population; outrages upon personal dignity; intentionally directing

attacks against the civilian population as such and against individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities; unlawful imprisonment; conscripting and enlisting children under the age of fifteen years into armed forces and using them to participate actively in hostilities; persecution on gender and political grounds; and other inhumane acts.

The ICC confirmed that domestic courts have not responded to atrocities adequately or at all and that the Nigerian government has failed in its obligations to hold those responsible to account. However, the Office of the Prosecutor faces serious resource constraints to investigating and prosecuting new situations and cases. We therefore urge HMG, as a State Party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, to ensure any investigation is adequately resourced."

Intersociety reports that 1,400 Christians have been killed by the Nigerian army, police and air force. Nigerian army's former Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General Theophilus Danjuma says the armed forces are "not neutral, they collude" in the "ethnic cleansing in riverine states" by Fulani herders. He insists that villagers must defend themselves because "depending on the armed forces" will result in them dying "one by one. The ethnic cleansing must stop."

Commending the decision by the US State Department to designate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern because of FoRB violations and its recognition of escalating "religious-tinged violence," the MPs said "the lack of comparable response by the UK is both stark and alarming. If HMG continue to ignore or downplay the strong religious factor fuelling the conflict, as identified by the US State Department, resources will be wasted on the implementation of solutions based on a premise that has little-to-no impact on the violence."

UK government's response

Over £2 billion of UK bilateral aid was given to Nigeria between 2011 and 2018, an equivalent of £800,000 every day. However, we share growing concerns over how the funds are spent; and how it could be better spent – especially in relation to the protection of those most at risk of attack and the need to bring perpetrators to justice.

The UK is also one of the largest donors to the World Food Programme's emergency operation in North-east Nigeria, but it does not currently provide humanitarian assistance in the Middle Belt states, despite this being one of the worst-affected regions.

"For the UK merely to "emphasize the importance of mediation and inter-faith dialogue" trivialises the scale of persecution of Christians. It is too simplistic for the UK Government to label atrocities committed by Fulani militia as driven by desertification, climate change or competition for resources. Protracted attempts to address these (albeit important) longer-term factors will not stop the current rate of killings."