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Preliminary observations and recommendations
Abuja, 19 June 2026

Today concludes my official country visit to Nigeria which ran from 8 to 19 June 2026. The vibrancy and straightforwardness of Nigeria's civil society actors was inspiring to witness during this eye-opening visit. I am grateful to the Nigerian authorities for inviting this United Nations mandate and to the Ministry of Justice for its coordination of meetings with a number of authorities, to the Plateau and Kano State authorities for their engagement, to the Nigerian National Human Rights Commission for their broad ranging support, and to civil society for their active engagement. I had the good fortune of interacting with over 200 interlocutors during this timeframe.

During my visit, I met the National Security Adviser to the President of the Federal Republic, the Solicitor-General/Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Justice, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and with representatives of various departments of the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Development, the Nigeria Police Force and Nigeria Immigration Service. I also met Supreme Court Justices and the Nigerian Human Rights Commission (NHRC). I had asked for a number of other official meetings at the Federal level and regret that these could not be facilitated. In Jos (Plateau State), meetings took place with the Deputy Governor, the Commissioner of Justice/Attorney General, the Commissioners of Education, of Health and of Housing, the Solicitor-General, the Special Envoy on Peace and Security to the Governor, members of Plateau State Advisory Council on Inter-Religious Harmony, the Director-General of the Plateau State Peacebuilding Agency, and with the NHRC State Office. I also visited an IDP settlement in Plateau State. In Kano (Kano State), meetings were held with the Secretary to the State Government, the Commissioner of Justice/Attorney General, the Commissioners of Religious Affairs and of Police, the Solicitor-General, the Chief Registrars of the High Court and of the Sharia Court and the Director-Generals of the Hisbah Corps and of the Special Services Department. I also met with representatives of the Nigerian Bar Association and the NHRC State Office.

During my visit, I met representatives of various religion or belief communities and organisations, faith-based actors, members of civil society organisations (CSOs), lawyers and academics across the three locations. I further met with the Resident Coordinator and representatives of various UN entities at the UN House in Abuja, and with members of the diplomatic community.

This official country visit focused on exploring how freedom of thought, conscience and religion (freedom of religion or belief) interacts with human rights realities on the ground throughout this vast land.

Nigeria is a country of multiple, multilayered diversities and a rich pluralism – a 'multi everything country'. Its estimated population of approximately 240 million puts it as the sixth most populous country in the world.[1] It has a 923,768 km square land mass, is composed of 36 states plus the Federal Capital Territory, 774 local governments, 371 officially recognised ethnic groups, which its rich history attests to. Yet the narratives about Nigeria, and even related structures and policies, are often reductive and polarising of this pluralism. No one description is adequate to capture the whole picture of freedom of religion or belief throughout Nigeria. The search for a single explanatory framework across Nigeria may be tempting but proves highly inadequate.

This is the fortieth year of this mandate and its fiftieth country visit. The purpose of country visits is to explore freedom of thought, conscience and religion as upheld in international instruments;[2] non-discrimination on the basis of religion or belief; and consideration of violations of human rights that are carried out in the name of religion and report on this to the UN Human Rights Council.

Freedom of religion or belief provisions in international human rights obligations, binding on Nigeria, protect "theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. … [It] is not limited in its application to traditional religions"[3] and includes indigenous spiritualities.[4] These legal obligations call for the absolute guarantee of freedom to change religion or belief without any coercion whatsoever.[5] This freedom goes far beyond the right to worship alone and in private, to observance, practice and teaching[6] and a host of other manifestations,[7] which can only be legitimately limited in accordance with a law that is non-discriminatory, absolutely necessary, applied in the most restrictive manner possible, proportionate and only on the grounds of public order, health or morals and the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.[8] The non-discrimination obligation applies across numerous rights such as housing, employment, education, liberty and security of person, and equality in marriage and family life. Non-discrimination with regards to services has been adjudicated both by the UN Human Rights Committee and the Supreme Court of Nigeria with respect to funding provision for religious education.[9] Overall, the lens through which the international human rights legal framework on freedom of thought, conscience and religion offers is far broader than what was understood by most of our interlocutors as the scope of this freedom.

In the Nigerian legal and policy framework, these triple aspects of freedom of religion or belief arise in the constitutional framework (with Section 38 guaranteeing freedom of thought, conscience and religion), in various laws at the Federal level and at the state level, and in corresponding policies. Parallel legal systems and mechanisms apply in some contexts and give

[1] There has been no census carried out since 1999 due to political sensitivities, so figures are based on estimates.
[2] Notably, article 18 of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The latter was ratified by Nigeria in 1993.
[3] General Comment 22, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4, para. 2.
[4] UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, articles 5, 11.2, 12, 25 and 34.
[5] ICCPR, article 18.1 and 18.2
[6] ICCPR, article 18.3
[7] 1981 UN Declaration on All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, A/RES/36/55 (1981 Declaration), para. 6.
[8] ICCPR, article 18.3
[9] Waldman v Canada, *CCPR/C/67/D/694/1996* See also Adamu v Attorney General of Borno State (Nigeria) 1996 8 NWLR 203

rise to some tensions that will be detailed in my full report to the sixty-fourth regular session of the UN Human Rights Council.

Discussion of freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria elicits very acute concerns about insecurity, violence and conflict which has spread throughout the country and has generated huge alarm, albeit to different intensities and for different reasons. These include terrorist actions, gang violence and banditry incursions, land grabbing to mass displacement, armed conflict and cattle rustling, hostage taking to arson attacks, destruction of holy places and schools, large scale kidnappings in remote areas and civil unrest around protests and strikes, decimation of irrigated farmlands and whole villages and livelihoods, through endless cycles of threats, fear and death in expanding areas of the country.

Impunity and lack of accountability have reportedly entrenched these cycles of fear and violence and encouraged its spread. Previously these cycles were focused in particular regions, for example in the Northwest and North Central. They have now spread across many parts of Nigeria, but largely outside urban areas. Federal authorities report a noteworthy stepping up of ongoing court cases in seeking to address this.

What remains uncontested is that, at the village and hamlet levels in particular concentrations of the country, scores of innocent people experience killings, mass violence and the total decimation of their livelihoods, time and again, witnessing little or no justice. Horrific instances have included mass arson against whole communities with survivors forced to move to camps for the internally displaced with no return in sight, unable to farm, earn a livelihood, and provide for their families. In other instances, rural communities are forced to strike 'peace deals' with the bandits – reportedly assigning fields to them, granting them the proceeds from the produce of other fields, and 'taking any woman that they want' from the hamlet. In the contexts where this was reported, the communities concerned were predominantly Christian. As one interlocutor emphasised, however, 'we all bleed red' and the endangerment of all human life and wellbeing – whether Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Baha'i, traditional African religionist, atheist, Buddhist, Gideon, Eckankar, humanist, Jewish or other – is equally grievous.

Attacks on schools and taking hostage of children also occur repeatedly across many states. It is rare for such attacks to be prevented though there have been welcome instances of this. The involvement of the authorities sometimes leads to the release of a small number of the school children often after a long and painful wait. The infringement of a whole host of child rights resulting from this will be discussed in the full report, including the situation of Almajiris.

Hostage taking also selectively targets more elite members of society. Priests, senior generals and former politicians and their family members have been taken hostage and killed. In many instances extortionate ransoms are demanded to release the hostage alive. Some societal actors even suspect that the scale and spread of this points to the complicity of the authorities.

Whereas the purpose of this visit was to consider the human rights situation regarding freedom of religion or belief, raising this topic with various stakeholders almost exclusively gave rise to these responses of acute concern regarding widespread insecurity.

Across the board, and time and again, interlocutors described Nigeria as being composed of religious blocks: a predominantly Muslim north and Christian south, and then specific pockets of Christian or Muslim dominance within the six geopolitical zones of North Central, North East, North West, South East, South South and South West, and then in each of the local

government areas. What this block account overshadows and restricts is the freedom for each and all to be able to declare their own thought, conscience and religion or not to do so. Nobody should be compelled to declare their religion or belief according to international human rights law[10] and Nigerian constitutional safeguards, yet it is reported that administrative forms in Nigeria routinely ask for religion – across processes related to the federal government, states and the private sector – for example in job applications for federal and state civil services posts (despite it being discouraged), university admission, birth registration, scholarship applications (especially from state government), military and police recruitment forms, government services including pensions, public school enrolment (in order to be assigned to Christian Religious Knowledge-CRK or Islamic Religious Studies classes) and some legal or notarial settings (court oaths, sworn affidavits). These fields should be optional rather than mandatory, but in practice there is pressure to fill them in. It is also reported that application for a Nigerian passport and the National Identification Number (NIN) used to have a religion field, but this has been removed in compliance with international standards.

The existence of the religion field in such forms reinforces religion as a predominant organising principle of Nigerian society which, in turn, makes it highly susceptible to religion being 'played' for power, politics and wealth. Whilst some bemoaned this, many were resigned to the inevitability that politicians and political hopefuls at state and federal level alike, will seek to 'buy influence' from religious pulpits and through religious leaders. This moves 'religion' far from the human right to freedom of religion or belief, and its focuses on non-discrimination and the free enjoyment of thought, conscience and religion.

The regular 'religious block' accounts of religiosity restrict the space for those other than the two dominant religions, and brush over intra-religious differentiation such as Shia, Sunni and Ahmadi; Pentecostal, Seven Day Adventist and Catholic. This account also results in societal and administrative, cultural and structural restrictions on others, particularly on the non-religious. However, questions regarding marginalisation and discrimination on the basis of religion or belief in Nigeria have been overshadowed by the security concerns. Numerous stakeholders reported 'systematic discrimination faced by Christians throughout the north' and 'a narrower bandwidth of rights for Muslims in the south', whilst others brush these off. These silos need to be broken for religious profiling to end and for full equally to become possible. Minority rights provisions[11] and the definition of discrimination based on religion or belief[12] will be discussed more fully in the full Council report.

The experiences of the acute insecurity situation – albeit of different intensities and forms – also map onto the religious make-up of particular communities impacted by the violence. Each incident, episode and pattern of violence may demonstrate multi-layered, multifactorial crises. However, alertness as to the increasingly polarised religious landscape, and growing fear and segregation, they also map onto religious difference.

Regarding mass atrocities, there were sharply contrasting observations of them being *exclusively* religious to *not* being religious at all. However, these accounts of them being religious or not come from very different angles, and they mean different things. When comment is made that 'the attacks *are* religious' it may mean that religious calls (such as *Allahu Akbar*) are used during the attack; that the manifesto of the suspected perpetrators denounces

[10] General Comment 22, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4, para. 3.
[11] ICCPR article 27 and General Comment 23, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.5.
[12] 1981 UN Declaration, para. 2.2.

the other(s) in the name of religion; or that the victims are (almost) exclusively of a particular religion. The claim that 'the attacks *are not* religious' can mean that the attackers were not acting in accordance with the true spirit of their religious teachings; that the attack was likely driven by other more dominant motivations (land, economic resource, climate change, mining for mineral resources); or that the victims included those of another religion too.

When such attacks repeat time and again with justice not being seen to be done, this is understandably described *by the victims* as 'persecution' or 'genocide'. When everything in one's world has been reduced to dust, when religious leaders have been killed and places of worship destroyed in that attack, when one has seen no action, inadequate prevention or the delivery of justice from the authorities, then why would one think otherwise? Such victims also see the authorities – both at the state and the Federal level – as culpable. One victim spoke to being displaced six times over the last 10 years, each time needing to start from scratch and moving from field to field, field to camp and back again, only to face the murder of family and close neighbours before being forced to relocate to an even more austere reality. Another spoke to three members of the nuclear family having been singled out for murder. These realities go beyond the niceties of legal definitions. We cannot deny victims of grave violations a voice. A legal determination can ensue when Nigeria domesticates the ICC Statute and allows international crimes to be tried in domestic courts. In the interim, and as a human rights mandate, I do not reframe the voices of persons on the ground giving expression to their own reality. As one interlocutor pleaded, 'we need a humanity first perspective'.

Authorities often formally express lack of capacity to ensure security for all across this vast land, noting that they are 'overwhelmed' by terrorist groups (which have included Boko Haram, ISWAP, JNIM, among others), banditry and criminals; sometimes suggesting that these groups come across from neighbouring countries. Considering the scale of the challenge, some authorities reported that they are 'really not doing badly, considering.' In some cases, authorities have called on communities to protect themselves. Victims reported many bloody instances where the authorities did not show up when, for example, herdsmen violently attack in large numbers or mobs gather on an accusation of blasphemy. Notable examples which seized the nation include the Sunday Jackson case with respect to the former, and the Deborah Samuel case with respect to the latter. This has led to a rise in vigilante groups in the form of private military arrangements, armed organised groups and community self-help vigilantes.

In IDP camps this may take the shape of young men seeking to protect children going to school; community members setting up blockades on roads during Friday prayers or Sunday services; or hamlets keeping overnight watch to protect the fields from being decimated and villagers from being torched. The circulation of weapons and arms gives rise to concern. Without adequate oversight, the understandable and routine setting up of temporary weekly blockades for safety may be difficult to distinguish from the erection of illegal vehicle check points for kidnapping and ransom collection. This is especially the case given the history of groups such as Yan Daba and Yan Tauri that have fuelled street violence and insecurity and have been used by some politicians for their own interests.

In addition, civil society reports serious concern that state security budgets are not transparent and may result in largescale corruption. The authorities point to the autonomy of states and the hope that the State Police Bill will be passed and address such concerns. Others express concern that unless there is accountability, the bill risks weakening the existing oversight from the Federal authorities. More encouraging feedback comes from well-run community police committees (CPCs) that bring community representatives and police together in closer

collaboration for ensuring security. Local youth peacebuilding initiatives, peacebuilding agencies such as that established in Plateau State, and sustained interfaith dialogue and collaboration facilitated by Nigeria Inter-religious Councils (NIREC) also show much promise if sustained and adequately resourced over time. Similarly, authorities report on the anticipated positive impact of employing security and neighbourhood watch guards, as well as initiatives such as the National Livestock Transformation Plan 2025 and the proposed Forest Guards Initiative.

It is important to also highlight the federal-state relationship in relation to the enjoyment of the core fundamental rights enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution (sections 33 to 46), which include freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom of expression; non-discrimination; and the rights to life and dignity. Access to the enjoyment of these rights come into tension at the state level within the plural legal systems in relation to personal status matters, blasphemy, hate speech, and criminal punishments which were introduced in Nigeria's northern states in the early 2000s. At the very least it creates departures from fundamental rights guaranteed in the Constitution. Some understood this as resulting directly from the politicisation of religion in Nigeria. Another considered that 'the federal politicians didn't take the lead in allowing the emergence of the criminal provisions, but they conceded it'. Many, especially legal experts, saw this development as standing in sharp contrast to Section 1, Chapter 10 of the Constitution, that "The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any region as State Religion." One interlocutor insisted that 'we must elevate the constitution'.

The laws and legal mechanisms that have been established in the northern states are welcomed by many of its state authorities who insist that 'it's our culture', 'it's morality ahead of legality', suggesting that those who don't like it 'can move to their part of the country'. Even in the case of the April 2025 landmark ruling of the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice on blasphemy laws in Kano,[13] there was defiance that the decision cannot be binding on Kano. The full report will discuss this topic further in light of international standards - including the authoritative international guidance of the Rabat Plan of Action and its six-part threshold test warning of restrictions on expression only focused on content-based determinations; and the Fez Declaration and Programme of Action addressing the role of religious leaders and faith-based actors in countering and prevention incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes.

The robust conversations with the over 200 interlocutors from 8 June through to today have attested to the richness of the civic space in Nigeria and the courage of victims who are bold, outspoken and committed to the betterment of society for the good of all. There is no doubt that Nigeria has the expertise, experts and committed, inspirational youth to secure freedom of thought, conscience and religion for all on an equal basis. There is also no doubt that there is a long way to go until that is fully realised.

These are my preliminary findings. I will submit my report containing my full observations and recommendations from my visit to Nigeria to the UN Human Rights Council in March 2027.

[13] ECOWAS Community Court of Justice, *Incorporated Trustees of Expression Now Human Rights Initiative v. Federal Republic of Nigeria* (ECW/CCJ/APP/41/23; Judgment No. ECW/CCJ/JUD/20/25, 9 April 2025).

I count on the continued cooperation of all relevant authorities in my follow up and stand keenly ready to be of any assistance in advancing freedom of thought, conscience and religion objectives in Nigeria.

Thank you.