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Victims of a gunmen attack react at the internal displaced camp upon the arrival of Nigeria Vice President Kashim Shettima, in Bokokos, north central Nigeria, Dec. 27, 2023. (AP/Sunday Alamba)

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Nearly four years ago, the Biden administration removed Nigeria from a list of countries whose threats to religious freedom are of "particular concern," but continued attacks on Christians and other religious groups by Islamist militias have prompted calls from local faith leaders and members of the U.S. Congress for the designation to be restored.

In Africa's most populous nation, a deadly cycle of violence has unfolded for several years, with Christian clergy and laypeople as well as moderate Muslims falling victim to murder and kidnapping. The Christian nonprofit Open Doors recently reported that in 2024 some 3,100 Christians were killed and more than 2,000 kidnapped in Nigeria.

On Wednesday (March 12), U.S. Rep. Chris Smith of New Jersey, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, held a [hearing on religious freedom violations in Nigeria](#) that included testimony from Catholic Bishop Wilfred Anagbe of the Diocese of Makurdi, in central Nigeria, and Family Research Council President Tony Perkins, a former U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom commissioner.

Anagbe accused the Nigerian government and police of not taking action to stop the violence, and he told the subcommittee that in addition to killings, kidnapping and rape, Christians are routinely denied public office. "We live in fear, because at any point it can be our turn to be killed," the bishop said.

Perkins appealed to the White House during the hearing to reassert "country of particular concern" status on Nigeria under the International Religious Freedom Act that allows the U.S. president to impose economic penalties. "The U.S. should apply targeted economic sanctions on Nigerian officials that are complicit in religious persecution," he said, adding that trade and security agreements should be used to pressure the government. Perkins also called for the Trump administration to name a new ambassador for international religious freedom.

In Nigeria, the Rev. John Joseph Hayab, a Baptist minister and chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria in 19 Northern States, told RNS, "No one desires that their country is in the list, but putting Nigeria back there should encourage the government to act." According to Hayab, the violence in Nigeria is not limited to Christians, and the designation would awaken the government to act for justice and give equal rights to all, such that no sect is treated as superior to another.

"All the people who have died should not have if the government had acted. I think it would encourage the government to wake up. I hope it does so before it's listed," said Hayab.

The Nigerian government has rebutted the claims of targeted killing of Christians, saying that while previous reports by the U.S. Congress had led to Nigeria's designation as a country of particular concern, the security challenges were complex and not rooted in religious persecution.

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"The ongoing security challenges stem from criminality, terrorism, and communal clashes, particularly conflict between farmers and herders, which have been exacerbated by climate change, population growth and competition over land resources," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement.

Of Nigeria's nearly 229 million people, Muslims comprise 53.5%, while 45.9% are Christians. The violence is largely the work of two groups — the extremist Islamist militant Boko Haram and its splinter factions, and a range of militias or bandits linked to Fulani herders, Muslims who have waged a campaign of land grabs against Christian farmers in the fertile, and more Christian, "Middle Belt" of central Nigeria as the Fulanis' grazing land has dried up over the past decades.

In August, the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa reported that the little-known Fulani Ethnic Militia was carrying out most of the killings in Nigeria. The militia, according to the [Aug. 29 report](#), has organized along ethnic and religious lines, carrying out attacks and abductions without resistance from the Nigerian security services. Although both Christians and Muslims are victims of the violence, Christians have endured most of the violence as attackers burned their homes and farms.

Over the last four years, the militia has killed over 55,000 people and carried out over 21,000 abductions in the North-Central Zone and Southern Kaduna, the report said.

Bishop Oliver Dashe Doeme of the Catholic Diocese of Maiduguri, in the northeastern corner of the country, backed relisting Nigeria as a country of concern.

"Let it be so that the world can know this is what we are going through. The naked truth is that Nigeria is on the brink of collapse," he said in a telephone interview.

Calling Christian persecution "our daily experience," the bishop said: "We have a government that is not functioning very well, and that is why these criminals move about terrorizing innocent citizens, including priests who are supposed to be highly respected. Let the world know. The Western world has been quiet about our experience here."

Catholic Church leaders say that 145 priests have been kidnapped in the last 10 years, 11 of whom were killed; four are still missing. In the latest incident, a 21-year-old seminarian and a priest were kidnapped March 3 in the Diocese of Auchi, in Edo state. The priest, freed 10 days later, said the seminarian had been killed. Another Catholic priest, from the Diocese of Kafanchan, was found murdered on March 5.

"They don't see the priests as anything," said Doeme. "They do not respect them, and that is why they are being abducted here and there, and some of them killed." He added, "But, then, we are people of faith and we do not give up our hope, especially this year of hope declared by Pope Francis," referring to the current jubilee year declared by the pope.