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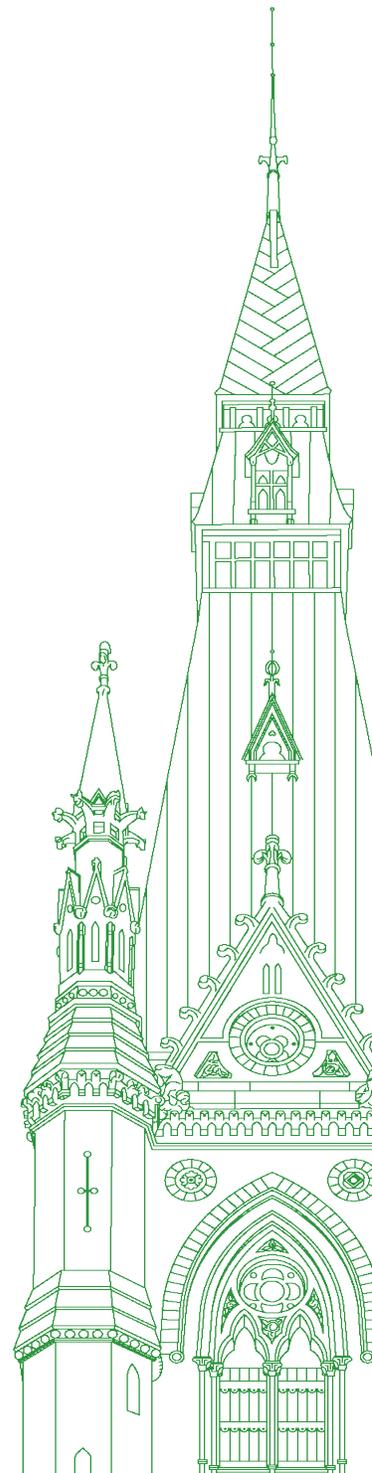
Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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Chair: Fayçal El-Khoury

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1545)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number four of the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee is meeting for a briefing on the persecution of Christians in Nigeria.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members may participate in person or remotely using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of witnesses and members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen, you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation of floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and can select the desired channel. This is a reminder that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[*Translation*]

I would now like to welcome the witnesses.

[*English*]

As an individual, we have Ms. Rosemary Esene, by video conference. We also have Mark von Riedemann, director for public affairs and religious freedom, by video conference, and Kinga Schierstaedt, head of section for Nigeria, by video conference. From the Association of Nigerians in Nanaimo, we have with us Mohammed Usman, president. From the Center for Strategic and International Studies, we have Oge Onubogu, director and senior fellow, Africa program, by video conference. From Religious Freedom Institute, we have with us Reverend Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett, senior fellow.

I would like to give every one of you a period of five minutes for an opening statement.

I will start with Ms. Rosemary Esene.

Welcome. The floor is yours.

Rosemary Esene (As an Individual): Good morning, everybody.

I stand before you today with a heavy heart, carrying the pain of a tragedy that transcends borders, a tragedy that has left scars on my community in Nigeria and on my soul. On April 24, 2018, my dear friend, Reverend Father Joseph Gor, along with 15 others, were brutally murdered in the Gwer West local government area of Benue state, Nigeria, by armed Fulani men.

Prior to the murder of my dear friend, he had posted on his official Facebook page, urging the public and Nigerians to assist them, as there were heavily armed Fulani men patrolling the vicinity and were threatening their lives. Unfortunately, that call fell on deaf ears as, on April 24, he was murdered, together with his fellow priest and 14 lay faithfuls, including women and children.

Father Gor was not only a man of peace. He was a servant of God, a dedicated advocate for his community and my dear friend. He was not just a priest. He was a protector of the weak, a beacon of hope for those who literally had no voice. His murder, along with the senseless killing of his fellow citizens, is a tragedy that should have never occurred, yet it is part of a wider pattern of violence that has plagued central Nigeria for years.

This violence, fuelled by ethnic and religious conflict, has destroyed families, displaced thousands and torn apart communities. It is not just the loss of life that weighs heavily on my heart. It's the ongoing cycle of violence, impunity and fear that continues to haunt my people. These killings are not isolated incidents. They're part of a broader crisis that demands international attention, action and solidarity.

As I stand before you today, I ask you for your support in raising awareness about the crisis in Nigeria, especially in Benue state. We cannot allow the bloodshed to continue without speaking out. We cannot allow the memory of Reverend Father Gor and others who were taken from us to fade into silence. They were fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, children—members of a community whose only crime was to seek peace, justice and the right to live without fear of violence and to worship without being harassed or killed.

To my Canadian friends, I urge you to stand with the people of Nigeria in this dark moment. Canada has long been a champion of human rights, democracy and protection of the innocent. Now, more than ever, we need your support in calling for justice for the victims of these horrific attacks. We need your voice in condemning the ongoing violence and pressuring the Nigerian government to take meaningful actions to end the conflict and to hold those responsible accountable.

Beyond that, we also need your help in sending a message of solidarity to the people of Nigeria. We need to remind them that they are not alone. The international community stands with them in their struggle for peace, justice and the right of freedom of association.

For Father Gor and the 15 others who were murdered in April 2018, they're not just victims of senseless violence; they were symbols of the hope that still exist in the hearts of Nigerians. Their legacy is one of courage, compassion and resilience. I ask you to honour their memory by not allowing their deaths to be in vain. Let us work together to ensure that justice prevails and that peace, not violence, defines the future of our homeland.

Thank you.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you. The time was respected.

Now I invite Ms. Kinga Schierstaedt, the head of the Section for Nigeria. Madam, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Kinga Schierstaedt (Head of Section for Nigeria, Aid to the Church in Need): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for the opportunity to speak about Nigeria.

When discussing religiously motivated violence, we see three groups: those who suffer, those who comment and those who work with victims. ACN belongs to the latter.

Through the local church, we support projects and receive first-hand information from bishops, priests and sisters all over the country. Today, we speak for the church in Nigeria, both in the north, where Christians face severe discrimination, as well as in the northeast and middle belt, where Christians suffer extreme persecution.

I will address discrimination first.

Of the 36 states in Nigeria, 12 in the north operate under sharia law. In states like Sokoto, Zamfara and Katsina, discrimination is extreme. A Muslim man, for instance, can marry a Christian woman, but not vice versa. Christians accused of blasphemy face long detentions, and civil service jobs are largely closed to Christians unless they convert. As a bishop told me recently, "We may not be shot in the streets, but the crushing pressure and relentless discrimination are enough to break many." This is what many call systematic discrimination.

Second is persecution. In Nigeria, it's layered: religious, ethnic, social and historical. Some bishops describe the violence as genocidal. Churches are destroyed, and Christians are killed for their faith.

What is clear, however, is that the violence cannot be reduced to a single narrative. For example, an overarching issue is banditry. In

particular, kidnapping is a business affecting Muslims and Christians alike. Religious leaders are a prime target, not necessarily for their faith but because they command higher ransom payments.

Having said this, however, in the middle belt, especially Benue state, the growing violent persecution is alarming. Farming communities are under attack, entire villages are destroyed, families are killed and millions are displaced. Of Benue's five million people, about two million live in IDP camps. The attackers are often nomadic Fulani tribes. The reasons are complex: land and water disputes, pre-existing ethnic tensions, intercommunal violence and stress from climate change.

What's most alarming is the growing religious component and radicalization. Groups like al Qaeda and ISIS do not create new conflicts, but they intensify them, injecting extremist ideology, funding and tactics. For instance, our partners report attackers shouting "Allahu Akbar" as they burn homes and kill families.

Impunity worsens the crisis. Perpetrators rarely face justice, and those on the ground tell us the same thing: The government is not doing enough to stop systematic discrimination or to end the killings.

ACN supports the Catholic Church nationwide, but needs differ. In Maiduguri, the church provides trauma healing for victims of Boko Haram to break this spiral of violence. In the middle belt, where survival is the priority, our help focuses on emergency relief and pastoral care, just trying to bring a little hope where all seems lost.

This is Nigeria today, a nation where discrimination and violence intersect, where faith communities struggle to survive and where silence—national and international—remains deafening.

My colleague Mark von Riedemann, who is in charge of advocacy and the religious freedom report, will mention one possible way forward.

• (1555)

The Chair: Are you finished, Madam?

Kinga Schierstaedt: Yes. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Mohammed Usman, president, Association Of Nigerians in Nanaimo.

You have the floor for five minutes. Welcome, sir.

Mohammed Usman (President, Association Of Nigerians in Nanaimo): Thank you, Chair and honourable members of the subcommittee, for inviting me to speak today.

My name is Mohammed Usman, president of the Association of Nigerians in Nanaimo. Our association includes Nigerians from diverse faiths and ethnic backgrounds. Many of our members have been directly affected, through family or personal experiences, by the ongoing violence in Nigeria.

I appreciate the committee's commitment to examining the persecution of Christians in Nigeria. The issue has gone on for far too long and has devastated countless families and communities.

The focus of today's briefing is the ongoing persecution of Christians who have been targeted for their faith, killed in the tens of thousands, displaced from their homes and subjected to the destruction of their churches and places of worship. These experiences are real, well documented and deeply painful, both for survivors and for diaspora families who have loved ones back home.

While Christians face severe and targeted attacks, it is important to recognize that they are not the only victims of Nigeria's insecurity. Across the country, ethnic minority groups in the middle belt, such as the Tiv, the Berom, the Idoma—which is the one I belong to—and the Adara, have endured repeated attacks. Farmers, pastoralists, women and children are caught in cycles of kidnapping, extortion and displacement. Muslim communities have been massacred by Boko Haram and other extremists. This broader context does not take away from the persecution of Christians, but it helps explain the scale and complexity of the crisis.

The violence is driven by multiple overlapping factors, including but not limited to governance failures and corruption, poverty and economic inequality, ethnic rivalries, climate-related land pressures that pit nomad Fulani herders—mostly Muslims—against farming communities made up of both Christians and Muslims, organized crime feeding off of weak institutions and terrorism. At its inception in 2002, Boko Haram declared Nigeria an apostate entity and was against the Nigerian state and everyone associated with it, not against any particular religion.

Christian communities, especially in Plateau and Kaduna states, have experienced the burning of churches and destruction of whole villages, mass displacement into overcrowded camps, loss of family members, deep trauma among women and children and fear that limits worship, education and daily life.

Similarly, Muslim families in Borno and Yobe live under constant threat from extremist attacks. Middle belt ethnic groups face repeated raids. Schools, mosques, markets, farms, government institutions, police stations, army bases and even U.S. buildings have been burned and destroyed. While Christians are often uniquely targeted in certain regions, the violence spares no religion and no ethnicity.

The government response has evolved over time with different approaches. These steps show little progress, but the challenges remain immense.

Our association's recommendations for Canada are as follows: strengthen diplomatic engagement by encouraging Nigeria to ensure equal protection for all at-risk communities, especially Christian minorities; increase humanitarian support for NGOs assisting displaced Christians and other victims, particularly women, children and trauma survivors; help trace terrorist financing by support-

ing Nigeria's efforts to identify sponsors and financiers of Boko Haram and related groups; advance accountability by encouraging investigations and prosecutions of perpetrators of mass violence, regardless of their ethnicity or religion; invest in peacebuilding and early warning systems by supporting interfaith peace programs and community-level conflict prevention; listen to civil society's voices by engaging survivors, local leaders and diaspora communities; and support anti-corruption initiatives to help strengthen the independence and capacity of Nigeria's anti-corruption institutions.

The persecution of Christians in Nigeria is a serious and urgent human rights concern. I urge us all, though, not to oversimplify a very complex socio-political situation. Muslims, Christians and traditionalists are suffering under the same climate of insecurity. By addressing the persecution of Christians within this broader context, Canada can help promote justice, peace and human dignity for all affected Nigerians.

Thank you so much for your time and commitment to this.

I'll be open to taking questions.

• (1600)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Usman. The time was well respected, so thank you.

Now, from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, I would like to invite Ms. Oge Onubogu, director and senior fellow, Africa program, to speak.

Welcome. You have the floor for five minutes.

Oge Onubogu (Director and Senior Fellow, Africa Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies): Thank you very much. Good afternoon, everyone.

I am honoured to share my views with you on this important briefing. The CSIS does not take policy positions, so the views represented in this testimony are my own, not those of my employer.

In Nigeria today, ethnicity, religion and language—not nationality—remain the benchmarks of identity for Nigeria's highly diverse population. While Nigeria has witnessed repeated ethnic and religious clashes over the years, its ethnically and religiously diverse population is not the problem or the cause of these conflicts.

According to a 2021 Afrobarometer survey, nine in 10 Nigerians expressed willingness to live with people from different ethnicities and religions. This survey also noted lower levels of trust among citizens, with 92% stating they must be careful when dealing with others, indicating that while there is a sense of unity among Nigerians, trust issues persist, affecting social interactions.

It is important to understand the nature of violence in Nigeria and its causes, which extend beyond the religious or ethnic overtones that appear to motivate that animosity. A narrow narrative that seeks to reduce Nigeria's security situation to a single story of widespread persecution and the mass slaughter of Christians in Nigeria misses other important considerations and misinterprets the complexity of violence and interfaith relations in the country. In actuality, religious and ethnic violence in Nigeria is a symptom, and the hate speech and conspiracy theories that often drive it are throwing fuel on a fire long ignited by Nigerians' frustrations over what are essentially failures of governance.

Nigeria is facing different but overlapping security crises. Literally every corner of the country is affected by some form of violence and crime. Nigeria's security threats are multi-faceted and overlapping, stemming from, among other things, religious extremism, banditry, resource competition, communal land disputes and separatist agitation. They also tend to be enmeshed in history, entangled in poverty and exacerbated by political contestation.

The interplay between religion and politics in Nigeria is deep and complex. Nigerian political leaders romanticize Nigeria's unity but do little to cultivate it. On the contrary, they often stoke ethnic and religious tensions in election campaigns, seemingly to distract from their failure to deliver for the people they are supposed to serve. The divisive political climate of Nigeria's 2023 elections illustrated this tendency. As Nigeria approaches yet another contentious election campaign period, religion will remain a significant factor in Nigeria's 2027 elections, influencing candidate selection, voter behaviour and campaign strategies, just as we saw in 2023.

There is a widespread acknowledgement by all Nigerians that the security situation in Nigeria has gotten worse over the years. Narratives that focus solely on the killings of Christians tend to ignore the reality that religion is often a secondary factor in Nigeria's internal violence, rather than its main driver. While there have certainly been many incidents in recent years in which religious groups and places of worship were targeted for atrocities, data suggests that killings motivated explicitly by religious extremism or intolerance account for only a part of overall fatalities across the country.

• (1605)

In 2022, a study by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project, ACLED, found that from January 1, 2020, to June 30, 2022, amid an overall rise in attacks on civilians, "violence in which Christians have been specifically targeted in relation to their religious identity accounts for only 5% of reported civilian targeting events." In recent years, most victims of violence in the middle belt have been Christians in farming villages from various ethnic groups. Most are presumed to have been killed by herders and militia, who are predominately Muslim, but they were not killed expressly because of their faith.

The Chair: Can you please wrap it up?

The time is over, but I will give you a few seconds to finish.

Oge Onubogu: Thank you very much.

Let's go back to the root causes here and what the international community can do in this regard.

Without interfering in internal politics, the international community can engage deeply and broadly with communities across Nigeria to better understand the nuances driving the conflicts in the country. While it is never wise to dismiss religion as a cause of conflict, it is unproductive to label a conflict as solely driven by religion or to single out just one group when there are so many other factors at play.

Clearly, a fresh approach is needed for both Nigeria and the international community. The international community should embrace Nigeria as an aspiring democracy and strategic partner in Africa. The Nigerian government, on the other hand, must make accountability of perpetrators central to its response. The Nigerian people need accountability and this accountability needs to be prioritized.

Thank you.

The Chair: Now, I would like to invite, from the Religious Freedom Institute, Dr. Andrew Bennett.

Welcome, Dr. Bennett. You have the floor for five minutes.

The Reverend Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett (Senior Fellow, Religious Freedom Institute): Thank you, Mr. Chair, I'm grateful for the opportunity.

In view of all the testimony that's already been given, I'll shorten my comments to what has not been covered by my previous colleagues.

Nigeria is very clearly a country in social crisis. The Nigerian human rights organization, the International Society for Civil Liberties and the Rule of Law, has estimated that between 2009 and 2023 at least 52,000 Christians have been killed, 18,500 have been abducted and are likely dead, and more than 20,000 churches and Christian schools have been attacked. Since 2023, this persecution has continued unabated.

Between January and August of this year, a further estimated 7,000 Christians have been massacred. Militias have burned homes and crops, pushed out people from their territory to seize land and forcibly imposed Islam in some of these regions.

However, this is not simply about land disputes and scarce resources. Sometimes when we sit in committees and subcommittees like this, we hear big numbers of people who are suffering grave human rights atrocities. I want to remind all of us here that each one of these persons was a unique, irreplaceable human being, members of families, with souls, so these are horrific numbers given in that light and with that perspective.

Muslims also face persecution, as you've already heard. For example, the various factions of the Boko Haram insurgency are dyed-in-the-wool jihadists waging what they view as a holy war. However, some of these jihadists have killed Muslim civilians alongside Christians. Indeed, Boko Haram's Islamist ideology makes virtually no distinction between the two.

Christians are being targeted in large part through mass killings by the Fulani militias. Again, the reasons why are complex. The persecution has been under way in central Nigeria since March 2010, but has increased exponentially and has spread to other parts of the country.

Communities are chosen for targeting by the jihadists. Overall, 2.7 Christians were killed for every Muslim killed in the data period of 2019-23, and I'm referencing a study by the Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa, which was a groundbreaking study trying to understand the nature of the persecution.

However, again, Muslims are also terribly affected by the violence, but I think we need to note the issue of proportionality where Christians are typically more targeted.

What about the Nigerian authorities in all of this? As Nigeria expert James Barnett of the Hudson Institute has argued, Nigeria is experiencing multiple distinct yet overlapping conflicts. Some but not all of these conflicts are religious in nature. The complexity of the situation has highlighted the inability of Nigerian authorities to tackle the many significant socio-religious and socio-political challenges that besiege the country.

Indeed, the insufficient action by successive governments and alleged complicity by elements in the security forces have allowed religious persecution to spread like a cancer, with militias increasingly targeting ethnic Hausa Muslim communities in the northwest.

No matter where these attacks happen, the army is often absent or fails to head off the attacks through effective intelligence and mobilization. The militias are largely able to operate with impunity. The Nigerian government and its armed forces seem incapable of addressing the situation decisively. I want to emphasize that it's a clear case of religious freedom being egregiously violated, not due to government restrictions on religion but rather due to civil authorities' inability to address the social hostilities that manifest as religious persecution.

Why is this horrific situation being ignored?

Firstly, Africa is largely ignored by western democracies and by western media. This is an endemic challenge; it's not just with regard to Nigeria and this situation.

Secondly, there is the downplaying of the role of religion in conflicts such as this. Many secular western elites, including foreign policy actors, have equivocated on the nature of the violence,

downplaying or misrepresenting it by failing to recognize the important religious element of these attacks. This attitude was also present when ISIS swept across Iraq and Syria in the mid-2010s. The vast majority of those in the foreign policy community have little to no understanding of religion and how it defines not only social relations but also politics, culture and even economic activity in most of the world. Therefore, they're not able to address these situations as they present.

I've argued before that diplomats need to "get religion" if they're going to be effective in many regions of the globe in addressing the challenges that are there.

What can be done?

Global Affairs Canada can work through the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief to develop sustained multilateral policy and programming initiatives to tackle the persecution at its roots.

Global Affairs should reorient its approach to in-country programming by expanding its partnerships with reliable and experienced faith-based agencies that have the networks, sustained engagement and deep knowledge of a particular region. Examples could include Aid to the Church in Need, Christian Solidarity Worldwide or the Mennonite Central Committee.

• (1610)

Finally, Global Affairs Canada, through the Canadian Foreign Service Institute, should develop a mandatory program of training in religion and foreign relations for Canada-based and outbound diplomats, with targeted country-specific modules to better equip them with the knowledge required for engaging religious actors and issues. On the ground, we can do much, but we need to understand what is happening.

Thank you.

• (1615)

The Chair: Thank you, Reverend.

Thanks to all our witnesses.

Now I would like to open the floor for questions and answers. I would like to start with Mr. Majumdar.

You have the floor, sir, for seven minutes, please. Go ahead.

Shuvaloy Majumdar (Calgary Heritage, CPC): Thank you very much.

Thank you to all who have testified and to all who have borne witness to the hundreds of thousands of stolen souls and stolen lives in this horrific conflict.

Dr. Bennett, I'll start with you. You mentioned that there have been many reasons why this particular conflict has not featured prominently in the international media or in our own national debate. Many of us represent Nigerian Christians in our communities and across Canada. Much of our foreign policy, if I might start at a macro level, has been secularized around the questions of the status of African democracy in different states or the singularity of special leadership that emerges and sometimes then disappears over time, and occasionally you'll see environmental plans and schemes, whether it's a solar plant here or there.

The subtext to all of it is a population and a people whose demography is radically changing over these last 15 to 20 years, and especially so in the last 10 years. The growth of Christian life in Africa has been a particularly interesting story, and a reality that I think many communities, particularly in the African north, are contending with in terms of fanatics who are resisting that. The second story is one of the African resources and African markets and how countries are at play between the western model and the Beijing model.

This conversation about religion and foreign policy is a difficult one. It's one that you've spent a lot of time reflecting on. Based on the realities of Christian life and Christian growth in Africa, but particularly in Nigeria, as we're here to talk about today, what's your reflection of the realities of this advent that policy-makers are missing and not capturing?

Rev. Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: I think the first thing is to recognize that religious actors are major players in the life of a country. Living here in Canada, we live in a highly secularized country. We're not used to engaging religious actors in the same way. We might consult a local pastor, a local bishop or a local imam or rabbi on a very particular issue, but in a country such as Nigeria, or in many of the countries of the world, religious actors are major players, as I said, not only in the cultural or religious life of the country but in the socio-economic and political life of the country. They have major influence.

The first thing is to recognize that there's a need to engage these players, but then also, for western diplomats, you have to acquire the language to do that engagement. That means learning what the most effective way is to engage religious actors. If you don't have the nimbleness of the language, then you can't do that in a very effective manner. You're not only doing a disservice to them by not engaging them as they should be engaged, but you're also not really helping your own interests as Canada, in this case, or a particular country, if you can't have those deep engagements and form those very deep networks that can help us to understand more clearly what the dynamics are in a given country. That's been an Achilles heel that we've had for many decades.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you for that. It's certainly a reality of how people live their lives day to day that often gets neglected.

In the context of Nigeria very specifically, as you note, nearly 18,000 churches have now now been destroyed across Nigeria: direct evidence of widespread violent action against Christians in that country specifically. How unprecedented is this level of destruction and violence against religious institutions in any country?

Rev. Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: It's unprecedented. In my time as ambassador for religious freedom, which I began in 2013, I certainly remember widespread religious persecution—for example, the burning of churches or other places of worship, whether in Egypt or in Myanmar. However, I do not recall this scale of persecution.

When the Office of Religious Freedom was in existence, there was a very effective program in Nigeria that actually predated the Office of Religious Freedom. The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade had a program working with different communities in Plateau state, in the central belt around Jos, trying to develop early warning systems whereby the communities could connect with one another when there would be an attack so that things didn't escalate. We've, therefore, had a presence in Nigeria before as Canadians with partners.

However, now I think the situation is so critical that it's a time for us to re-engage with partners bilaterally, multilaterally and through international institutions, and—as I mentioned—most effectively, I think, with those organizations that have a deep knowledge of what is happening on the ground. We need to work with them in ways that can begin to address some of the roots of this type of persecution because it is, indeed, unprecedented.

• (1620)

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you very much.

Dr. Nmadu, I'll turn to you in the remaining minute and a half that I have.

Hundreds of thousands is a death-toll number that has formed over a decade. We know that this conflict has persisted across the region. In your mind, how has this issue been able to persist for so long in Nigeria?

The Chair: Excuse me. We're waiting for your answer.

Mr. Majumdar, can you repeat that, please, or change it?

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Okay. In the absence of that, Mr. Chair, maybe I'll reclaim some of that lost time and follow up with Dr. Bennett with a third question. I'm sorry about the connection.

Dr. Bennett, you pioneered tools in how Canada and other states can support religious communities in crisis. In your opening remarks, you mentioned some very practical solutions. Could you expand a little further on what Global Affairs Canada and our country could be doing more meaningfully to stand with the persecuted Christians in Nigeria?

Rev. Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: As I mentioned, I think we need to work more closely with faith-based organizations that are doing this work, and we have a number of them represented as witnesses today. However, I think also it's to be—if I can put it this way—sort of innovative in how we do programming and develop policy options by looking at best practices from our allies, including those allies that are more engaged, perhaps, in Nigeria than we are. The Commonwealth Secretariat is an underutilized body that can also be quite effective, given its deep presence there.

I just think we need to be a little bit more innovative in how we approach these types of situations—maybe by going to partners we haven't used in the past or have maybe underutilized in the past.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you.

Mark von Riedemann, I'll ask you this very quickly: How has the implementation of sharia law in 12 states across northern Nigeria contributed to this crisis?

Mark von Riedemann (Director of Public Affairs and Religious Freedom, Aid to the Church in Need): The challenge of sharia law is that it has been included in the penal code, which means that the principles of sharia are applied to all citizens equally in northern Nigeria. Obviously, there is the risk to both Muslims and Christians because both suffer under the harsh implementation, especially when it comes to questions of apostasy, questions of expression of faith and, let's say, the clear violation of religious freedom, which is absolutely not present in northern Nigeria.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Majumdar

Now I would like to invite Ms. Anita Vandenberg.

You have the floor for seven minutes, please.

Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all of the witnesses, particularly those of you who have personal tragedies and experiences in your own families and networks. We've been hearing very good testimony today. Hopefully, we'll be able to shed some light on a situation that isn't getting enough attention.

I'd like to start my first question with you, Ms. Onubogu, because you warned about the oversimplification of this conflict. You spoke a little bit about root causes, and I think you were going to elaborate a little bit more and ran out of time.

I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that. What I heard you saying is that religion is really the secondary factor and that we need to look at all of the causes in order to understand how to prevent and how to end this kind of violence. Could you elaborate on that, please?

• (1625)

Oge Onubogu: Thank you so much for that question. I appreciate the time given to be able to elaborate on that.

I grew up in Jos, Plateau state. I am actually American-born, but I spent a lot of my time growing up in Jos, Plateau state, and I visit the middle belt regularly. I have been directly impacted by this. I see and I am really deeply aware of how this also impacts once-vibrant communities over time. You see that it is layered by politics and by differences and growing mistrust in communities. These conflicts are protracted. They have gone on for many years.

It's extremely important that we ensure that in the narrative or how we look at this issue, we're able to take into account the layers and the complexities that feed into the issue. Simply looking at it... As I've often cautioned, it is never wise in the case of Nigeria to say that religion isn't part of a conflict. It's also unproductive to label a conflict in Nigeria, knowing how complex the society is, as solely driven by religion. It makes it difficult for us to be able to address the key root causes of this conflict, which are multi-faceted and overlapping with issues, including the lack of response from the government.

In many years, the government's lack of response has also created room that has fed a narrative. It's important to understand what the institutional challenges are within the government that are driving that lack of response and what the challenges are within communities that are also driving the lack of ability to come together to try to address this issue.

It is a very complex issue. It's one that requires us to be able to cut through the layers and, as one of the witnesses has actually highlighted, go down to the grassroots and connect with the people in these communities. They are directly impacted by these conflicts. They know where it hurts. They understand the changes in their community. I think that when we begin to do that—when we begin to understand the complexity of Nigeria—we will be one step closer, or even closer, to addressing the challenges that we see.

Anita Vandenberg: You spoke about the governance failures and impunity. Nigeria is one of the priority countries for Canada in our counterterrorism capacity building program.

What is the best role for the international community when it comes to prevention and building capacity for governments to be able to more effectively handle the situation?

Oge Onubogu: I speak more from my understanding of how the U.S. partners with Nigeria. I can't speak to how Canada partners with Nigeria.

In terms of the U.S.'s engagement with Nigeria, a lot of support has gone into counterterrorism efforts. Even as those supports have gone into counterterrorism efforts, over time the threats have only increased. As of 2025, the global terrorism index actually ranked Nigeria in the top 10 of countries that were most impacted by terror. This number has only gone up since when Nigeria was indicated in the ratings for the global terrorism index. It basically signifies that this is more of a systemic problem. It's an institutional challenge.

When we think about security in Nigeria, we have to think about Nigeria's entire security architecture. That's one of the things that I point out to folks because sometimes people do not understand the way Nigeria's security architecture is structured. You have central police. There are no state police or community police in Nigeria. A lot of these conflicts happen at the local level. When they happen at the local level, because Nigeria's policing system is so centralized, you have to make a call to the capital city, Abuja, before you even get police officers out to the community level. Very often, the police officers who might be stationed in that state may be stationed in the capital of the state, and a lot of these conflicts are happening in local, rural communities. Early warning systems are important because communities are able to quickly alert.

Nigeria has gone through different processes of police reform, but none of them have really been effective. It's really about trying to focus and work with Nigeria on strengthening its local policing system. So much support has focused on hardware—buying big machinery—but really trying to focus on the local policing systems and on intelligence are areas that I would propose.

• (1630)

Anita Vandenberg: Thank you very much.

I have just a few seconds left, Mr. Usman, but you said similar things about the complexity, about the governance failures and about the need to engage local communities. Could you comment on those same issues, in the time we have left?

Mohammed Usman: Thank you so much for the time.

Yes, as the former speaker answered quite correctly, it's hard to simplify what's going on in Nigeria. My name is Mohammed Usman. Everybody would think I'm a Muslim. My dad is a Muslim and my mom is a Christian. I have five brothers and five sisters. My sisters are all Christians. One of my brothers I know for sure is a Christian. The others, I don't know what they are. That's how a lot of communities in Benue are. That's how Benue is. I think a lot of times we tend to classify people on religion based on their tribe or their name. In Islam, if you're not a Muslim, you're a Christian. You're not any other thing.

Nigeria's problem is a failure of the government. When Boko Haram started, or when they got big, the president was a Christian. They took him out and put in a no-nonsense president, a former general named Buhari, who was going to tackle this issue. His vice-president was a pastor. Buhari was incapacitated for a few months, over a few years, and the vice-president did nothing about it. The current president's wife is an ordained minister. She's a pastor.

In Nigeria, religion is a problem, but when people are talking about the main problem—

The Chair: Can you please wrap it up? We are one minute over.

Mohammed Usman: Okay.

The main problem is not religion, per se, but people take advantage of that to attack people based on their faith. Nigeria's problem is the failure of the government to tackle insecurity. They have allowed these things to grow for a very long time.

Thank you.

The Chair: My friend Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for seven minutes.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I was just at an event with Tibetans. I arrived just in time.

Ms. Onubogu, it seems there are many causes for the current situation. Based on the work you've done with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, or CSIS, what is the main dynamic fuelling instability in Nigeria today?

[English]

Oge Onubogu: To your question about what the main dynamic is that feeds instability in Nigeria, it is complex, as has been stated. You know, this year in particular, Nigeria is celebrating 26 years of uninterrupted civilian rule. This is since the country's independence. The country gained independence in 1960. This year marks

only 26 years of uninterrupted civilian rule. In many ways, Nigeria is still going through a process of really trying to ensure that in its aspirations to be a real democratic country, its institutions match its aspirations.

It has been mentioned time and time again by some of the other speakers that we have seen this issue of instability become complex. Over time it has metastasized. You've had consecutive governments that have come in during elections and have basically said they will address it. When they get into office, you realize that the institutional capacity actually doesn't match the ability to address these challenges.

A second point as well is the question of political will. In terms of many of these conflicts in Nigeria, as I mentioned, with upcoming elections in Nigeria in 2027, we have seen time and time again in Nigeria where religion and ethnicity have been manipulated by political actors just to gain power. Once they get into office, there is no way they will be able to hold those who helped them get into office accountable. At the end of the day, we see the Nigerian people suffering because politicians are manipulating religion and ethnicity in the country, using it for their own personal gain.

It's a complex issue, one that encompasses the question of politics, one that looks at the question of power and one that looks at the question of security and how society is laid out. We have to understand how each of those are interconnected for us to be able to identify the root causes and real solutions, sustainable solutions, to address the root causes of conflict in Nigeria.

• (1635)

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Does your work allow you to make a distinction between violence motivated by religious factors and violence motivated by territorial and economic rivalries?

Is there any way to differentiate between the different motivations for violence in Nigeria?

[English]

Oge Onubogu: Yes, there is. There are clear instances in Nigeria where you can draw a direct line and say, "This was because of religion." We've seen it happen in places like Sokoto state or in some of the states where there's sharia law, where people have faced atrocities or blasphemy charges just because of their religion. There are clear instances where you can draw a line. In other environments, where there's a mix, it becomes more complex.

When I say it's a mix of overlapping issues, the Nigerian government has to be able to acknowledge when a conflict is solely driven by religion or conflicts or incidents that are caused by religion, and then also acknowledge conflicts that are complex and mixed. This is where the gap often lies. You need to have the political willingness and those in office who can firmly stand up and say they see incidents where religion is a main driver.

There are clear incidents in Nigeria where you can draw a straight line to show where religion has had a significant role to play in a conflict.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What role can the international community play?

The African Union comes to mind, as does Canada or perhaps a group of states, like the European Union.

What role can these actors play with regard to what's currently taking place in Nigeria?

Could forums be held internationally where discussions might have an impact on Nigeria?

[English]

Oge Onubogu: There are different avenues and different spaces where these conversations can take place and are already taking place. As one of the previous speakers already mentioned, religious actors and community leaders in Nigeria—in Africa in general, but in Nigeria most especially, as Nigeria is a very religious society—play a significant role in identifying and working with their communities. In different surveys that have been conducted in Nigeria, when citizens were asked who they trusted at the local level, many of them said they trusted their community leaders, traditional leaders or religious leaders before they mentioned their trust of security actors.

The international community can create a space where these actors can come together and really be able to dialogue. Nigeria is a very important country when it comes to U.S.-Nigeria relations or Canada-Nigeria relations, or when Nigeria stands as a country in the international community of nations. It is time to have a dialogue with Nigeria at a breadth that is honest and brings in different actors within the country that may have felt left out of these conversations. Bring people together for real, honest dialogue.

There is an opportunity here. There is a space here to do it. The time is also right to have this type of discussion. I know this cycle of violence has gone on for too long, and I think people across the board in Nigeria—regardless of their religious background, be they Christian or Muslim—have a broad acknowledgement that the levels of insecurity are very high. You will find a willingness in the Nigerian people to engage.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Onubogu.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Mr. Davies, the floor is yours.

[English]

You can take the floor for five minutes.

Fred Davies (Niagara South, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The discussion around the underlying social issues in Nigeria ranges from a dysfunctional government, as described earlier, to overlapping issues such as the lack of infrastructure on the security side, adequate policing, community safety and politics.

I'm going to ask Dr. Bennett a general question.

What needs to happen first, and what can Canada do, knowing the complexity of the issues on the ground? You mentioned earlier that there's a language barrier for western democracies to have a role in rebuilding when they're fundamentally not able to communicate on the ground. How can we bridge that gap?

In your view, what are the first several steps that need to take place, from a Canadian perspective?

Rev. Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: I'll begin by saying that I'm a religious freedom expert, not so much a Nigeria expert.

I think the first thing is that we have to recognize what Canada's strengths are with regard to this type of situation. Where can we support the building up of civil society? We have a very good track record in that regard, not simply in Africa but in other parts of the world.

As I said, we should be engaging religious actors, but we have to do that in a way that is respectful of who they are. We also have to try to understand the position they hold within a society, as the previous speaker just mentioned.

I think we have to try to understand what the ways in which we, as Canada, can act and build upon our own strengths are. In terms of what Nigeria needs, grosso modo, I would say that it's what all the other witnesses have said. It's a question of governance and building up governance and of the reform of the security apparatus. I would leave it to them to make comments more on that than I would. In this case, the questions I can respond to best relate to religious freedom.

Fred Davies: Thank you.

Mr. Usman, can you pick up on that theme, based on the question I asked? Do you have any specific suggestions of what we can do as a government and as a country to help find a pathway to peace and security?

Mohammed Usman: Thank you so much.

Yes, it's one word: accountability. I think Canada has the resources to hold Nigeria and the Nigerian government accountable. Canada has the power and influence to ask Nigerians tough questions, and the Nigerian government should answer those questions. I don't think the world has held Nigeria accountable enough, especially the leaders.

If you give them weapons and you give them resources, what if it ends up in the hands of the herdsmen? There is news and rumours and stories about these herdsmen having better equipment than the Nigerian army. How are they getting these materials? How are they getting these guns, helicopters and all these weapons?

The best way is that Canada needs to find a way to make the Nigerian government and Nigerian officials accountable. Ask them tough questions. They should give straight answers on what is going on and how Canada can help to solve the insecurity problems in Nigeria.

I'll add that I'm a Canadian and I'm a Nigerian. We don't want a situation where Canada goes into Nigeria to help them just to show that they're coming to help the Christians. That's not how we want Canada to represent itself. We want Canada to go and say that it wants to help with the insecurity problem in Nigeria, which is a lot. There are so many different things happening, like kidnapping and ransoms, where people end up dying because their families cannot afford to pay. It has nothing to do with religion.

My key word would be that Canada needs to find a way to hold Nigeria accountable for what's going on.

Fred Davies: Thank you for that.

As a Nigerian Canadian or a Canadian Nigerian, what is your opinion on how the media has covered the conflict over the last number of years?

Being a new member of Parliament and researching this issue, I was struck by, in my view, the lack of consistent coverage of the problems and, more importantly, the lack of discussion on the solutions. Can you comment on that?

• (1645)

Mohammed Usman: Yes, I can. You can only comment about things that you hear or places you've gone to. Like the speaker who spoke before me, Oge, said, there are a lot of communities in Nigeria on which there's not a lot of attention. There are no security forces present. There's no media. These are the thick core villages.

When I was in the youth corps—after you graduate from university in Nigeria, you serve the country for one year—and I was one of the people who did elections. I have friends who, when they went to the villages in the north, actually had to ride on cows to get to some of these villages. That's how they rig elections; there's no media there.

On the coverage, an average Nigerian, who's in Nigeria, will look at the international coverage and say, "This is not fair." Is it true that Christians are being persecuted in Nigeria? It's absolutely true, but for the whole world to take it on and make it look like Nigerians are killing Christians on the street and making it look like Nigeria as a state has a problem with Christianity, it makes Nigerians sad. We think, okay, this is not who we are. We have a government problem, a bad government that doesn't want to tackle what's wrong, but we're not a country that has a problem with Christianity. We're just a country that has bad leaders who are not tackling the issue of insecurity.

The Chair: Now I invite Mr. Zuberi to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today, both by Zoom and in person.

I'd like to start off by acknowledging Rosemary Esene. Thank you for sharing your story, and for the tragedy of your loved ones, we hope for strength for you.

I'd like to allow Mr. Usman to continue. You were giving some remarks, but, unfortunately, time cut you off. Do you have anything

to add about your personal story, or thoughts about how your personal story can be an example for a path forward for Nigeria?

Mohammed Usman: I come from a very big family. I'm from Benue state. My tribe is the Idoma. We're in the north central. Benue state is nicknamed the "food basket of the nation". We have very fertile land. The herdsmen are taking over a lot of communities.

Before I came here, I called my dad and told him I'm coming to do this. He's proud of it. He got me in touch with a chairman of a local government in my state, and he sent me a list of communities—about 23 or 25 of them—that have been sacked. When these people come in, they don't ask about your religion; they just want the land. However, again, like Oge said, the police are answerable to only the federal government. The state government has no power. Our governor in Benue state is a reverend, a pastor, a Christian. That's the governor of my state, but he has no power to tackle this issue.

We had an experience where my father's cousin, last year, was kidnapped. We couldn't pay the ransom. He got killed. He was a police officer. He was just travelling on the highway. It wasn't in the north; it was in the eastern part of the country. They kidnapped an entire bus of people. If they can't pay the ransom, they just kill them. These things happen rapidly, but nobody.... There's no media. There's no coverage about it.

Hence, it goes to my point that when we are reading this news—the comments from Trump and the western world painting Nigeria as a country where the only violence we see is against Christians—it makes Nigerians feel like they're not listening to what the actual problem is, which is a massive level of insecurity and safety concerns for people in the villages, for women, for children. It's just bigger than that.

Sameer Zuberi: Certainly. Thank you for that.

We have 100,000 Canadians of Nigerian descent. I have very close relationships with many in Montreal, and I know that many are watching today or will be watching. What advice do you have for Canadians of Nigerian descent on helping to raise this issue? Is it speaking with their co-workers or in schools about the challenges in Nigeria?

What advice do you have for others in the country?

Mohammed Usman: My advice for Nigerians who are in Canada is.... There's a lot of pressure on us, those of us who live here. Nigeria is a country where a lot of people come from very big families, and most of these responsibilities fall on us: When we get these phone calls that these things are happening, we have to support people back home. We are a very religious country. We pray a lot. We will continue praying and holding ourselves and—by any means necessary that we can—our community leaders accountable.

I am here today because the member of Parliament from my region is very passionate and interested in my community. She listens to us, Tamara Kronis, and she takes our advice; hence, it's the reason why I'm here today. I'm privileged to be here today.

We'll continue doing that. We are strong people who have faith and believe in our community pastors and the churches we go to. We keep talking to them to raise the bar, to raise our voices, to let the powers that be know that these things are happening and to share ideas on how we can make Nigeria a better place.

• (1650)

Sameer Zuberi: I'd like to ask Ms. Onubogu the same question: What can Canadians of Nigerian descent do to raise this issue?

Oge Onubogu: Thank you very much for that question.

I will approach this more from a global perspective, as I am not Canadian. I will approach it more as what the international community can do to uplift this issue.

As I mentioned, just in the community of nations, Nigeria's importance, its relevance, cannot be ignored. By 2050, the population of Nigeria will surpass the population of the United States. This country is one that currently has a population of over 220 million people. It's a very young population, with people who are vibrant, with people who are just amazing. They are full of life and want to see things happen.

Herein lies an opportunity for Nigerian citizens to work together, regardless of their religion, regardless of their ethnicity. I think the data is already out there that shows there is a willingness among Nigerians to work together to raise awareness about this issue, about the core governance concerns and about the core governance gaps or institutional gaps that exist.

Nigeria and Nigerians are more—

The Chair: Can you wrap it up please?

Oge Onubogu: Thank you very much. I will wrap it up there. Thanks.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have five minutes.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Nmadu, can you tell us about the types of violence most frequently experienced by targeted minorities in the most affected regions at present?

[*English*]

The Chair: Can you answer, please?

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The question is for the representative for Christian Solidarity Worldwide Nigeria.

I'm told he isn't here.

Ms. Onubogu, I'd like to let you finish your response, since you were interrupted.

[*English*]

Oge Onubogu: Thank you very much. It's very kind of you.

The opportunities in Nigeria definitely surpass the challenges that we see today. It's important that all those Canadian Americans, Canadian Nigerians, Nigerian Americans, the international global

community, all friends of Nigeria, basically, stand in solidarity with the Nigerian people, because there is more connecting the Nigerian people today than separating them.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Mr. Bennett, in your opinion, what should Canada's current priority be, not just with regard to the situation in Nigeria, but also with regard to religious freedom? The question is broad, but it is an important one.

[*English*]

Rev. Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: I think the priority for Canada, in terms of religious freedom in the world, needs to be a recognition that, as I said before, religion is something that animates most countries where religion is a major factor in how those countries understand themselves and how they engage not only with one another but with the world. The less we know how to engage religiously, if I can put it that way, the less we know how to engage with religion in a foreign policy context, the more we are at a very severe disadvantage. We have, I would call it, a diplomatic blind spot, where we're not able to understand how we can talk to people who are religious.

I'll give you an example. When I was serving as ambassador for religious freedom, one of our high commissioners came back to Ottawa for a summer visit. The high commissioner had been in two countries where there was a mixture of a Muslim population and a Christian population. The high commissioner came back and told me that they had met with a particular bishop, and I said, was this the Anglican bishop or the Catholic bishop? The response was, "I've never studied theology, so how would I know?" That's a bit of a startling response from a Canadian diplomat.

It would be similar to asking the bishop in that country after they'd met with a Canadian minister, "Did you meet with the trade minister or the foreign affairs minister?", and he says, "I've never studied political science, so I couldn't tell you."

We have to address this as Canada—and not just Canada but other western societies, western democracies, that are very secular. If we want to be effective in the world, if we want to try to address as best we can with the Canadian skills that we have, with what we have to offer in a situation such as Nigeria, we have to be able to engage on that level because that's how those societies function. We have to really try to work at that diplomatic blind spot. I think that's an ongoing issue we have to address in terms of how we form our diplomats, how we train them, so they can be the most effective diplomats on the ground in any given country.

• (1655)

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In short, you're saying that, basically, the priority should be to ensure that diplomats have adequate training and to delve deeper when religious issues arise.

Is that correct?

[English]

Rev. Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: It's really because diplomats should be able to address a particular situation, such as a conflict in Nigeria, and understand all of the different manifestations of that conflict and understand how they all fit together.

Again, if we get into a situation where we see it purely as a humanitarian crisis, but don't understand that a humanitarian crisis has different religious antecedents or colonial antecedents or economic challenges or whatever it might be, if we don't understand that, then we can't, as I said, be effective in engaging on questions that have those multi-faceted aspects.

I'm not saying that we have to all be theologians, but we have to have at least some greater understanding of religious issues.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What concrete impact would this have in a situation like the one before us today, namely, what is currently happening in Nigeria?

[English]

Rev. Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Again, as I mentioned—

The Chair: Give a quick answer, please.

Rev. Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Sure. As I mentioned in my statement, I think we have to find ways, as Canada, to engage in that situation through those who know it best. We have to find partners who can best address some of the challenges that Nigeria faces, but to understand it through their eyes, not simply through Canadian eyes.

The Chair: Thank you.

I now invite Ms. Tamara Kronis to take the floor for five minutes.

Welcome.

Tamara Kronis (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, CPC): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

I just want to start by thanking all of the witnesses. You've provided really nuanced and sensitive testimony about the complexities of the conflict in Nigeria. I really appreciate it. What I'd like to do is I'd like to use my time to focus back on the human impact of the conflict.

Ms. Esene, Rosemary, you told us in your opening statement about a close friend who was a priest who was killed along with a colleague and 16 parishioners at, I think, St. Ignatius Catholic Church in Mbalom in central Benue. I first want to say that we honour their memory today, and I want to thank you for sharing your pain with us.

While I recognize that the conflict is multi-faceted with more than just religion among its causes, the impact of the conflict is always going to manifest itself in a very personal way when it's your church that's been burnt down.

You spoke of freedom of association. You spoke of community. I'm wondering if you could share and elaborate a little bit with us on what it looks like for a Christian family or a congregation who

are trying to stay safe, or any congregation that's trying to stay safe in this conflict.

• (1700)

Rosemary Esene: Thank you very much. Thank you for having me.

The issues around these killings in north central or the middle belt in Nigeria are like my other colleagues have said. Policing is centralized, and most police headquarters and where they take authority from is centralized. Most people who suffer from all this insecurity and the inability to associate freely are people who live in the hinterland where there's no media and no centralized police. They don't have access to the government per se, or maybe they have access to government that is weak. For people who live in those places, most of the time they don't go to church because they cannot walk freely. Most of the time, they don't work. They cannot go to their farms because mostly people who work in the farms are really targeted. Most of the time, they don't have the opportunity to work freely in the community because of all these killings and all that.

May I add, we have a lot of IDP camps, internally displaced persons camps. Most of those people have been displaced from the community, so they cannot freely associate with people. They cannot freely attend religious functions. They don't live freely. They live in IDP camps. For me, most of these issues happen in the rural areas, in local community areas.

I'm sorry. It's echoing. Something is wrong with my mic.

Tamara Kronis: I'm sorry. I think we're having a technical problem, but thank you very much for that.

While we're sorting it out, Mr. Usman, I'll turn back to you. I want to thank you, first of all, for making the long journey to join us today in person.

The Nigerian diaspora in Canada is significant, and it's growing. You represent your whole community very well, and I'm grateful for that.

I'm wondering what role the conflict in Nigeria has played in the decision of Nigerians to come to Canada?

Mohammed Usman: Thank you so much. Thanks for that question.

It's a lot because a lot of rural places in Nigeria are not safe for people. You can have the means, but with this means comes the fear of insecurity, where people want to take what you have.

Again, it goes back to the point we were making—the bigger problem is not just the religion. It's a lot of insecurity that boils down to bad governance, poverty, lack of employment and lack of jobs. As an example, at a McDonald's in Nigeria, you probably need a master's degree to get that job. It's not just for a regular person.

When we migrate here, it's the chance to have that life—the Canadian promised dream that we can have a very good life that is safe and with employment. A lot of us who are Nigerians value, appreciate and enjoy this life today, and it gives us the resources and opportunity to be able to help our people back home. It's not just in Canada. It's all over the world where Nigerians migrate to, and there are a lot of people who migrate for different reasons, but insecurity is one of the big reasons a lot of people migrate.

The Chair: Thank you.

I invite Ms. Dhillon to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will start with Mr. Usman.

Thank you so much for sharing your story and family background with us, and for speaking of your father as well.

You said that you have brothers and sisters who practice both major religions, Christianity and Islam. You've said many times, as have some other witnesses, that it's not just defined by religion. It's ethnic and cultural differences that are driving these divisions and these conflicts.

I think this is a very important question to ask: Do you believe that just talking about religion and religious divisions can cause even further isolation and further different camps and conflicts, rather than trying to come together to find a solution?

• (1705)

Mohammed Usman: Thank you so much. That's a very good question.

At the point where Nigeria is right now, if you're a Christian, a Muslim or a traditionalist, you will take any help you can get. If the help is going to come in the form of helping Christians, it's a win for the entire Nigerian people, because how do you separate the help? How do you go into the country to solve the insecurity and say, "Okay, this is just for the Christians"? You're going to end up helping everybody.

On the conversation about separating Nigerians, I think it's going to be hard to separate Nigerians on that level, because we're that deep in the way our communities are. It's just the nuance of how it sounds or how it looks when the President of the United States says something like the tweet that he sent out. It looks like a lot of things are being missed.

I don't think it would separate Nigerians. At the point where we are, it's so bad that we will take whatever help there is, as long as it's positive help.

Anju Dhillon: It really hurts the heart to hear that, because there's such a situation of desperation.

Like my colleague MP Zuberi said, we have a huge Nigerian community. I'm very close to the members as well, and I've often spoken with them, especially about this situation. It's very disturbing to them.

The diaspora wants to see those who live in the homeland live with peace and with respect toward each other, because they do it

here. What's different over there? That's what we would like to ask you about. Do you think it's possible that they can coexist?

My time is running out, but internally, on the displacement, are they in separate refugee camps? How does the internal displacement look?

Mohammed Usman: Yes, and thank you so much again for that question.

I would just add that one thing Nigerians are certain about and in absolute unity for is that Nigeria does not want another Libya, nor do we want a Syria, an Iraq or an Afghanistan. Nigeria doesn't want that. That's not what we want. We want help, but we do not want intervention.

The IDP camps are different camps in different states and in different places. The church has done a lot of work for a lot of IDP camps. The government has its own camps as well. Having these IDP camps, as helpful as they may be, is more reactive than proactive.

At this point, we want more proactive solutions and to not make these people end up in camps instead of being in their homes. That's the solution we're working toward and praying for.

Anju Dhillon: When somebody is seeking out help internally, they're not divided by religion or ethnic background. It's just "come one, come all" and we will help you. Is that what you're saying?

Mohammed Usman: Absolutely.

Anju Dhillon: That's perfect.

Can you talk to us also about the land grabs? You mentioned a few times that it is land that people are coming after. Can you tell us who's driving these people? Who's empowering them to do this?

How can they have the audacity—I won't call it courage—to come ahead and try to take somebody's land? Who's behind them?

Mohammed Usman: To answer that question is tricky. There are a lot of rumours and a lot of reasons why these things happen.

Like I said, Benue, for example, is a very fertile place. There is news and there are rumours and information that states like Nasarawa are discovering a lot of natural resources. There are rumours that there are countries or governments that are tapping into these resources and funding these herdsmen to chase the villagers away.

Now our concern is why the country is not doing anything about it. Nigeria has always been a very strong military force in Africa when it comes to ECOMOG or anything like that. How come with Boko Haram and the herdsmen the Nigerian army can't do anything?

That's where the accountability piece comes in. Canada needs to hold Nigeria accountable and ask, "You are known for ground forces. You are known for a strong military in Africa. What's going on with Boko Haram and these herdsmen? Why can't you solve this problem?"

Again, like some of my fellow witnesses have said, it has to do with politics and it has to do with the individual benefits people are gaining from it. Religion is part of it, but religion is not the main reason why these things are happening.

Anju Dhillon: From your testimony, all of you, that's what we're picking up here today. It's not a question of division among religions, of my religion against yours. It's all of these other co-factors, but this is being used as a guise, I think, to cover that up.

You mentioned Boko Haram and said that they're also killing Muslims. This would be some of the reasons behind this—is that right? Their ideology is a certain ideology, but they're exercising violence toward Muslims too. There's no rhyme or reason to what's going on.

• (1710)

The Chair: Excuse me. We have exceeded your minutes.

Anju Dhillon: I'm so sorry. Thank you so much.

The Chair: I'll give you 10 or 15 seconds, no more.

Mohammed Usman: Thank you so much for that.

Yes, like you said, Boko Haram, when they came out, weren't against any religion. They were against the country as a whole. If you're Muslim and you are preaching against Boko Haram, they will come in and burn your mosque. They kill people in their mosques. It's not religion. It's just terrorism, to put it that simply.

The Chair: Thank you.

Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Usman, you just said that Canada should hold Nigeria accountable. Usually, Nigeria is a force in Africa. However, the country isn't able to get the job done, if you will.

How can Canada hold Nigeria accountable?

Should there be sanctions against certain officials or certain military leaders?

Is this what you're requesting here at the subcommittee?

[*English*]

Mohammed Usman: Thank you so much for that question.

To be honest, I would say that I am probably not versed in the knowledge or the information to answer how Canada could hold Nigeria accountable. Day by day, I'm a branch manager at a bank, and I have to hold myself, my staff and the bank as a whole accountable. If something is happening, I have to be held accountable whether things are going well or badly.

Regarding sanctions, I would not say that. I don't want anything that would make it harder for Nigerians to survive. It would not be something I would ever support.

The politicians and the leaders need to answer tough questions. They need to know that they can't just travel around the world and treat Nigerians like they're not human beings, be they Muslims,

Christians, traditionalists or whoever they are. It could be in any form of international relations that the people who are specialized in this department would know of, but Nigeria should be able to look at Canada in a meeting and say, "Okay, these are the problems we have, this is what we need and this is how we need to solve them," instead of beating around the bush and letting the killings of innocent Nigerians continue forever.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You also told us that you don't want an intervention. However, you need help. That's clear. I think you've made an appeal here.

That said, in your opinion, what would the consequences be if there were no international response to the current crisis in Nigeria? I think that's also what members of the subcommittee need to understand.

What would be the consequences of international inaction with regard to the current crisis in Nigeria, including inaction by the Canadian government?

[*English*]

Mohammed Usman: Thank you so much again for that question.

If there's any form of inaction by Canada or international governments, the fear is that whatever is happening will continue escalating. There will be no change; nothing is going to change.

Again, as my colleague Oge said earlier, elections are coming in 2027. These things tend to escalate when the election season comes. The election is always divided by who's going to get the votes from the northern, southern or eastern parts of Nigeria. The north-central area is one that whoever captures it wins the election. They find a way to play politics with all these things. They promise us all this. They capture a little bit of the population, and when they get into power, nothing happens.

The fear of the international community not doing anything means that these things will continue. Churches will keep getting burned. Muslims will keep getting killed. They're going to continue to take farmland and chase people out of their villages and their homes. It's going to be a continuous cycle of things that we're just going to keep talking about while nothing happens. It would be very beneficial for both Nigeria as a country and its people if the international community were to hold Nigeria accountable, in any form possible, by telling them to make a plan and tell the world, "Look, this is the plan. This is what we are doing. This is the help we need, and this is how to resolve this issue that's going on."

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

With elections coming up, wouldn't it be a good opportunity for the international community to ask the authorities in place to put an end to the violence and, if not, to get involved in this kind of election?

• (1715)

[English]

Oge Onubogu: I'm sorry. I didn't get your question. I didn't hear you.

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Earlier, you spoke of elections.

The Chair: Your time is up, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, but I can give you another 15 to 20 seconds.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Isn't there an opportunity for the international community to use the upcoming elections as a means to put pressure on the political authorities in place?

[English]

Oge Onubogu: Yes. It will be a good opportunity to also work with Nigerian civil society as we look toward the elections in 2027. The upcoming elections will be a good opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Scheer, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Hon. Andrew Scheer (Regina—Qu'Appelle, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'll be sharing my time with Ms. Kronis. I'll take just two and a half minutes, if that's all right.

Thank you very much to all our witnesses today. I think this is an incredibly important meeting to have. One thing I've heard from everyone who has presented is the need to build awareness of what's going on. I think it was Ms. Schierstaedt who said that the silence is deafening. Going into this meeting, I might have had a superficial understanding of what was going on. I've learned so much about the conflict, and I thank you all for that.

I'd like to talk a little bit about why we think that is and what we can do to get more attention on these problems. When I think about the conflicts going on in other parts of the world, with similar scales of displacements and similar levels of loss of life or persecution, there's a tremendous amount of media attention on some of those conflicts, to the point where lower levels of government, even municipal officials, are being asked to weigh in on one side or the other.

Dr. Bennett, can you speak to why you think that is? Why is the Canadian media, and maybe the international media, just not highlighting this? What more can we do to underline this? I think one of the witnesses said there's a lack of media attention and a lack of political attention. Sometimes those two things go hand in hand. When there's more media awareness, there will be more political attention to it as well.

Rev. Dr. Andrew P.W. Bennett: Thank you very much for the question.

As one of my theology professors used to say, that's question 6,502 that you ask when you get to heaven. It's a very difficult question to answer. The Canadian media has, obviously, limited reach. I think it's just generally hard for them to focus on these issues. That's an endemic issue and an endemic challenge.

I think part of the thing we have to do is recognize that in Canada we don't have the information we need. We have to go to those places where that information can be found. As I've said before, there are numerous organizations we can look to—many of them are represented in the witnesses at this committee today—to get a better understanding and analysis of what is happening and certainly to have the Nigerian Canadian community play a more significant role in informing the government on what is happening. Having Mr. Usman here is a very valuable representation of that.

That's one thing I found when I was serving as ambassador: You can really dig into the communities that are present in Canada to have a better understanding of the dynamics that are there on the ground in their countries of origin. I think we've seen that today. There's nothing we can do, I think, through this subcommittee to direct the Canadian media to be broader in its remit.

Tamara Kronis: On that note, I'd like to go back to Mr. Usman, if I could.

Digging into the question of accountability, when it comes to Boko Haram and the Fulani herdsmen, where is their funding coming from?

Mohammed Usman: That's a billion-dollar question. That's a question that a lot of Nigerians can't answer, or that they're just going guess about. Is it the government? Is it people in the government who are sponsoring them? Is it an outside government, as in non-Nigerian, sponsoring them? You see all the material online and they have these weapons. You wonder where they're getting them from and who is funding them.

It's a tricky question. Yesterday, when I was preparing for this, I was talking to my cousins in the village. They said it's probably the foreign organizations that are tapping gold or mineral resources, now that they've been discovered in places like Nasarawa or Benue. These companies are the ones funding these herdsmen to chase the villagers away.

A lot of things go into it. Can I tell you who has sponsored them and how they're getting their resources? No—but somebody is. It's a government or an organization.

• (1720)

Tamara Kronis: Maybe I'll move on to something a little bit more optimistic.

I have absolutely loved the time I've been able to spend with your community. I have learned a lot. One of the things I have seen is that Nigerians in Canada from all different walks of life are largely able to put these conflicts aside and find camaraderie and community together.

I'm wondering whether or not that experience provides any prescriptions for solutions here. Is there any advice you could provide for your fellow countrypeople who are not here, in terms of creating more community?

The Chair: Your time is up, but take a few seconds to answer, please.

Mohammed Usman: For people who know Nigerians, Nigerians are very fond people. They are people who enjoy life. They like to live life to the fullest. That's who we are. It doesn't matter your tribe, your religion, your race or wherever you're from. It's who we are.

My word to my fellow Nigerians and people is to keep the faith. Like I said, my mom is a Christian. I was brought up in the church world. My dad is a Muslim. I went to the mosque. I know both religions. Keep up the faith. We'll pray. We hope for the best.

We've never been blessed with great leadership. I was born in 1985. I probably know a little bit of politics. We've never been blessed with great leadership. We've always suffered from bad leadership and bad government. These things are why we are where we are today.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Zuberi.

Sameer Zuberi: Mr. Usman, you were about to touch upon the actors behind the different parties in Nigeria.

Can you elaborate upon that, including other states? Who is fuelling the conflicts?

Mohammed Usman: To quote one of our former heads of state, Abacha said that any conflict in your country that lasts over 24 hours, the government knows about it. That's what he said.

Honestly, I don't know who is fuelling this. It's bigger than what they are saying. It's bigger than just a random herdsman, cow herders or just people having access to these weapons. It looks like there are mercenaries. These are people who have trained. These are people who are being sponsored because it's tactical.

I get calls at 6 a.m. saying that a whole village has been sacked. It's strategic. It's planned. There have to be powers that be or companies supporting these people. I don't have names of people who sponsor them, but it's definitely not just random villages doing this.

Sameer Zuberi: Why isn't the government intervening despite the fact that, as you mentioned, there are boots on the ground in other parts of Africa from Nigeria? In your opinion, why is the government not intervening with boots on the ground?

Mohammed Usman: That's the million-dollar question. I go back to saying that Canada needs to hold Nigeria accountable to answer that question.

If Canada is asking Nigeria why it isn't dealing with this problem, the Nigerian government should be able to provide an answer that's a little bit satisfactory or even very satisfactory for the Canadian government to be able to view the plan around it.

Sameer Zuberi: I will put the same two questions to Ms. Onubogu. Can you please elaborate briefly on either one of these two points?

Oge Onubogu: The question you've raised on who is financing these networks provides an opportunity for Canada and the international community to work closely with Nigeria on intelligence sharing and gathering.

This is one of the areas, in terms of when I talk about weaknesses in institutions in Nigeria, where we see some weakness. Work with

Nigerian security actors at the national level, at the state level and at the local level to think through the process of how you gather intelligence and how you act on intelligence.

Apart from working with government agencies, there's also work that can be done with civil society groups, like religious and community organizations. Some of them, we have seen, have been extremely successful, especially when it comes to early warning, tracking and being able to understand before some of these conflicts break out.

● (1725)

Sameer Zuberi: I'll pass the rest of my two minutes to my colleague, Ms. Vandenbeld.

Anita Vandenbeld: My question is also for Ms. Onubogu.

I want to talk a little bit more about what the reconciliation would look like at the community level, which is something you've all talked about, particularly when you look at the fighters and the reintegration in order to create reconciliation in communities.

There is also the role of women. We know there's no sustained peace unless you have women involved. Rather than looking at women as just the victims, what is their role in civil society with helping to establish peace at the local level?

Oge Onubogu: I will answer this question based on my practical experience. Before I joined the CSIS, I worked with the U.S. Institute of Peace for over 10 years in communities across the middle belt, focusing specifically on this issue. One of the things we saw in working in local communities was that mothers, especially, were able to quickly identify the early signs of their sons or daughters being co-opted into violent extremist groups. Women were able to come together to form early warning networks and work closely with local community security operatives who were also connected to either the task force or the military task force that had been set up in those communities.

We've seen communities across the middle belt being able to band together. We've seen community projects that have been run solely by communities in many instances. They were actually led by the women in those communities. One significant area that hasn't even been spoken about in the middle belt—in parts of Kaduna, in particular—is the role female religious leaders from both the Christian faith and the Muslim faith have played in bringing communities together. Across Nigeria's middle belt, you'll find civil society organizations and networks from both the Christian and Muslim faiths that have been working in these communities for years and understand the conflicts.

One thing I always try to make folks understand is that a lot of these conflicts in these communities are predictable because these communities have been able to create—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Onubogu.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe, you have four minutes.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Usman, since I have four minutes, I'd like to give you two minutes so you could share something that hasn't already been said.

Do you have anything to add to the study we're doing today?

[*English*]

Mohammed Usman: Thank you so much for that. We have said a lot of things, and a lot of things have been shared about what is actually happening in Nigeria.

I want to emphasize that we shouldn't oversimplify what's going on in Nigeria. Are Christians being persecuted in Nigeria? Absolutely. Is there a bigger problem in Nigeria? Yes, there's a bigger problem in Nigeria, and that problem is insecurity, which Nigeria needs help with. If we're able to help Nigerians, be they Christians, Muslims or traditionalists, Nigeria will fare better.

I'm glad to have the opportunity to be here. I appreciate it. This is my first time doing something like this. I'm glad to be able to share my experience and my story. I'm glad that Canada is coming to the forefront and recognizing what's happening in Nigeria, and is willing to help. My community doesn't take this for granted. We sincerely appreciate it.

That's all I can add. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You've done an excellent job.

Ms. Onubogu, I'd also like to give you the opportunity to share something that hasn't been said yet.

What would you like to add? This is the last turn.

[*English*]

Oge Onubogu: I think almost everything has been said at this point. As you all know, we are also following these discussions in the U.S. For me, joining from Washington, D.C., it's wonderful to see that this discussion is also being had in Canada. It is one that deserves international solidarity, given Nigeria's importance and the country's relevance. This is an issue that deserves international solidarity in order to ensure a sustainable solution to the crisis at hand.

Thank you.

● (1730)

The Chair: Thank you. That concludes our meeting.

Mr. Usman, this is your first time doing this, and you did great.

Mohammed Usman: Thank you.

The Chair: On behalf of the committee, the members and the staff, I would like to thank our witnesses. Thank you for your presence, your time and your answers to the questions. Your presentations were illustrative and enlightened this committee. Thanks a lot. Hopefully, things will be better in Nigeria.

We will suspend for a few minutes.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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