



Committee on International Justice and Peace

3211 FOURTH STREET NE • WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194 • 202-541-3160

WEBSITE: WWW.USCCB.ORG/JPHD • FAX 202-541-3339

March 19, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
United States State Department
2100 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

As Chair of the Committee on International Justice and Peace I write to express my deep concern for the deteriorating situation in Nigeria and to support the recent statement issued by the President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) the Most Reverend Augustine Obiora Akubeze. I attach this statement for your reference.

Archbishop Akubeze points out that throughout its post-colonial history, Nigeria has been a resilient country even to the point of overcoming a brutal civil war and decades of autocratic rule. In many ways Nigeria's diversity and size has been a blessing in that conflict and violence in one area of the country did not spread to other regions, until recently. Despite this, for the last ten years, the CBCN has raised the alarm in response to the rise of Boko Haram, growing ethnic tensions, and the constant violence between herders and farmers. In every statement they have called on the government and all men and women of good will to stop the violence, reimpose the rule of law, address the root causes of violence such as government inaction, corruption and the reign of impunity that has existed for years.

Archbishop Akubeze's latest message signals a turning point. He tells us that the country is falling apart, on the brink of collapse and its very survival is at stake. The fundamental cause of this state of urgency is clear, "those who have assumed the duty and authority to secure the nation are either unable – or worse still, unwilling – to take up the responsibilities of their office."

The rise in the number of self-defense groups and non-state actors threaten security and indicate how little confidence people have in their government to protect the common good. Their demands are shifting from practical reforms such as greater autonomy to calls for secession. The CBCN calls on President Buhari, "...to govern the nation; not according to ethnic and religious biases but along the lines of objective and positive principles of fairness, equity and, above all, justice."

For the last ten years the United States has recognized the importance of addressing state fragility and the need to prevent the rise of destructive conflict. Congress passed the Elie Wiesel Atrocities Prevention Act and the Global Fragility act. Past Administrations have begun to develop and implement the strategies to stop violent conflict and resolve the issues that cause it.

During this same period conflict in Nigeria has risen in intensity and has spread to more and more states in the country. The CBCN calls on the Nigerian Government to muster the political will to conduct wide ranging judicial and administrative reforms to rebuild confidence in government. They also call for broad based dialogue between government and the people and between peoples of different ethnicities and religions to change the narrative from one of ethnic and communal violence to dialogue and collaboration between ethnicities and religious leaders.

I urge you to heed this call and to work with the CBCN, other faith communities and civil society to build a strong constituency for reform, dialogue and efforts to stop the violence and promote local peacebuilding efforts. I would like to thank you for the recent USAID allocation of \$104 million for humanitarian relief to those affected by the conflict and for the \$505 million in FY 2020-21.

On March 12, 2020 I wrote your predecessor with a similar plea and proposed strategic recommendations for action (letter attached). It is tragic that those recommendations are still relevant and more urgent today. It is time for all to intensify our efforts to address the fragile situation in Nigeria before it becomes a failed state.

Please do not hesitate to contact our Committee staff and Church leaders in Nigeria to explore ways we can work together to meet Archbishop Akubeze's goals.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ David J. Malloy". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Most Reverend David J. Malloy
Bishop of Rockford
Chairman of the Committee on International
Justice and Peace

Attachments: [Catholic Bishops Warn of Nigeria at the Brink of Collapse](#)
[Letter to Secretary of State - Nigeria](#)

WE MUST PULL BACK FROM THE BRINK OF COLLAPSE.

A Message of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria to all People of Goodwill in Nigeria 23 February 2021

Our dear brothers and sisters,

1. Our country Nigeria has gone through many crises, and so far, has managed to survive them, by God's grace. But the ongoing crisis in the country should be of grave concern to everyone who still believes in "one united nation under God". We are really on the brink of a looming collapse, from which we must do all we can to pull back before the worst overcomes the nation. This is not merely crying wolf without cause!

2. The very survival of the nation is at stake. The nation is falling apart. Serious insecurity, clearly evident in widespread loss of lives and property, for long unaddressed, has left the sad and dangerous impression that those who have assumed the duty and authority to secure the nation are either unable – or worse still, unwilling – to take up the responsibilities of their office. Time is running out and the situation needs to improve!

3. The clamour for self-defense is fast gaining ground. Many ethnic champions are loudly beating the drums of war, calling not only for greater autonomy but even for outright opting out of a nation in which they have lost all trust and sense of belonging. The calls for secession on an ethnic basis from many quarters should not be ignored or taken lightly. Many have given up on the viability and even on the desirability of the Nigeria project as one united country. No wonder many non-state actors are filling the vacuum created by a palpable failure of government. The Federal Government under President Muhammadu Buhari can no longer delay rising to its obligation to govern the nation; not according to ethnic and religious biases but along the lines of objective and positive principles of fairness, equity and, above all, justice. It is not too much for Nigerians to demand from Mr President sincerity both in the public and private domain. There are no more excuses.

4. We, of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, with members from all parts of Nigeria, are very highly disturbed about the present state of instability in the land. This must not be allowed to continue to fester and degenerate. We are raising this alarm because of our deep patriotic love for our nation, not for any sectional interests, be they political, ethnic or even religious.

5. Despite the persistence of crises around us; assassinations, Covid 19, kidnappings, murders, banditry, armed robberies, we sincerely affirm our faith in the viability and desirability of the Nigeria Project, as one prosperous nation under God. But we are also convinced that building such a nation, especially in our present circumstances, comes at a cost. We are also convinced that the alternative of tearing ourselves apart, comes with a cost that is far higher than what it takes to keep ourselves together. We must be ready to seek a common purpose with sincerity of mind. As individuals and as groups, we ought to be ready to make the necessary sacrifices that would enable us to manage our differences better and turn them into a positive rather than a negative force. Governments at different levels ought to lead the way.

6. We need to have the courage to admit that there is a lot wrong with our nation. It is our patriotic duty to point this out, with all objectivity and sincerity. The rule of law has too often been disregarded, giving way to widespread impunity, leading to a progressive break down of good order. There is a wide consensus that even the laws and rules we have made for ourselves are often the cause of our problems. No wonder there is an on-going clamour for constitution review, restructuring, decentralization of the security agencies and calls for many changes to many things we have been taking for granted. Examples include issues surrounding national census, constituency delimitations, states and the nagging issue of Local Government autonomy, violence and lack of internal democracy in political parties, a weak and compromised National Assembly, the Amendment of the Electoral Act etc. In these matters, the nation is not lacking in many good and brilliant ideas. What has been lacking has been the political will to embrace the change that is necessary for building a better nation.

7. We note the changes in the Command of the Service Chiefs. They are insiders and should be familiar with the problems of the insurgency and banditry. It is our prayer that we will witness a more co-ordinated strategy with State Governments and other security agencies for winning this sad war.

8. In conclusion, we wish to remind our countrymen and women that there are some basic values and principles that we need to uphold if the Nigeria project is to be successful. These include mutual respect for and acceptance of our diversities, a deep sense of justice for every person, equity, solidarity and inclusiveness. In addition, we must be ready for sincere dialogue, in the true sense of the word, as it was once defined by His Eminence, Francis Cardinal Arinze, who is a renowned expert in dialogue: "You talk, I listen. I talk, you listen." On the one hand, there should be a dialogue between the people and the government. Government has the duty to create room for such dialogue, with groups and with individuals. It means being open and receptive to criticism. On the other hand, we the people need to dialogue with one another across our various lines of diversities and identities. In particular, ethnic and religious groups need to find a way to put their heads together to deal with our common challenges.

9. We note with deep sorrow, the events that have occurred in Niger State. These developments still expose our collective vulnerability. There is an urgent need for a clear strategy between the federal security agencies and the state governments to end the tragedy that we face. In addition, we propose the need for a formal meeting of statesmen and women across the board for us to think through the challenges that seem poised to push us into the abyss.

10. We pray, and we call on all to pray and work for the achievement of one Nigeria under God where the principle of the common good will be thought out and enshrined. We submit ourselves to the directives of God the Almighty Father to fill us with the wisdom and courage to pull back from this brink of collapse. Amen.



Most Rev. Augustine Obiora Akubeze
Archbishop of Benin-City
President.



Most Rev. Camillus Raymond Umoh
Bishop of Ikot Ekpene
Secretary.



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March 12, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace, I write to express my deep concern regarding the level of conflict and instability in West Africa, specifically the increasing violence in Nigeria due to herder-farmer conflict.

Herder groups and farmers on their lands have lived together in peace for decades. However, over the last few years, this social balance has been upset by a mix of complicated factors. Desertification and over-grazing, herders from neighboring countries (sometimes well-armed), and population growth in Nigeria have all contributed to growing violent conflict between herders and farmers. In the first half of 2018, more than 1,300 people were killed in these armed clashes doubling the previous year's death toll to a level that is six times more than the number of people killed by Boko Haram (International Crisis Group Report 262, 2018).

The government has failed to respond to the sharp rise in violence despite the many warning signs. People on both sides of the conflict have lost all confidence in the government, as well as local and traditional leaders' ability and willingness to provide security, bring perpetrators to justice, and conduct reforms that would address the root causes of the conflict.

Starting in 2016 to the present, the Nigerian Catholic bishops have issued nine official statements condemning all herder-farmer violence and calling on the government to address the root causes of the conflict, end impunity, and rebuild the social fabric of the country. On February 26 (Ash Wednesday), the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria asked their faithful throughout the country to wear black and to offer prayers and penance in mourning for all those who have died. The entire body of bishops held a procession in protest of the state of insecurity.

This conflict threatens the national social contract designed by Christian and Muslim political leaders decades ago that had long bound the country together. The United States is a crucial partner with the Government of Nigeria, the most populous nation in Africa. I strongly urge you to work with the Government of Nigeria to:

- Partner with the Catholic Church and other religious leaders to develop a new national narrative of unity, Muslim-Christian collaboration and action to persuade the Nigerian Government to stop the violence and rebuild the social fabric of the country;
- Reform agricultural and animal husbandry regulations, guidelines and practices to end the armed competition over land and rebuild the social balance between farmers and herders;

- Work with Christian and Muslim religious leaders on the local level to develop programs of community-based mediation to end violence, promote reconciliation, and rebuild social cohesion;
- Reinstatement of accountability, transparency and the rule of law by prosecuting both civilian perpetrators of violence and security forces for violations of human rights.

Nigeria is critical to the stability of West Africa and the whole continent. Our committee and the bishops' conference Office for International Justice and Peace are ready and eager to work with you to promote peace and the common good in Nigeria and West Africa as a whole.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ David J. Malloy". The signature is written in a cursive style with a plus sign at the beginning.

Most Reverend David J. Malloy
Bishop of Rockford
Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace
U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops