

Trinitarian International Solidarity (SIT) report on the current situation in Nigeria

The Persecution of Christians in Nigeria

Introduction

The issue of Christians persecuted because of their faith in Christ dates back to ancient times of the Christianity. Medieval times with the crusade and also Modern times with all its forms of Revolution were not pleasant to all who confessed the Christian faith. This same problem of persecution of Christians remains relevant in the world today. Despite the efforts of the Catholic church with different religious denominations, some non-governmental organizations, as well as thinkers who have tried to present a **roadmap for the religious freedom right**. Unfortunately, it is clear that some Christians are still experiencing different kinds of persecutions because of their faith, and especially in countries where there is a strong presence of Muslims. According to 2020 statistics, Nigeria, which is a predominantly Muslim country with its different religious conflicts among the population is breaking the record of persecution in sub-Saharan Africa. However, what are the statistics of the population and the major religious denominations in Nigeria? In what context are the Christians been persecuted? And what can be our proposal to assist the Christians persecuted in Nigeria?

I: Statistics of the population and major religious denominations

Nigeria is found in the West Africa region, bordering with Cameroon, Chad, Niger Republic and Benin Republic. A Federal State with 36 States plus the Federal Capital Abuja. It is the most populous country in Africa with over 200 million inhabitants. Nigeria is a multiethnic country, for there're more than 250 ethnic groups. But The Hausa and Fulanis, The Yoruba and The Igbo are the three main ethnic groups. Because they occupy nearly 69% of the Nigerian population.

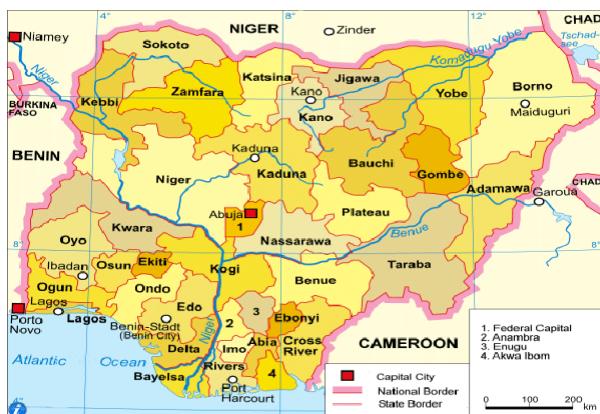
- **The Hausas and Fulanis** who form almost one people by their culture and Islamic religion occupy all the North-West, North-East and North-Central of Nigeria. They represent 42% of the population, with 95% Muslims and 5% Christians.
- **The Yoruba's** are in the South-West and South-South regions. They represent 25%

of the population, with 48% Muslims, 35% Christians and 13% of the ancestral religion.

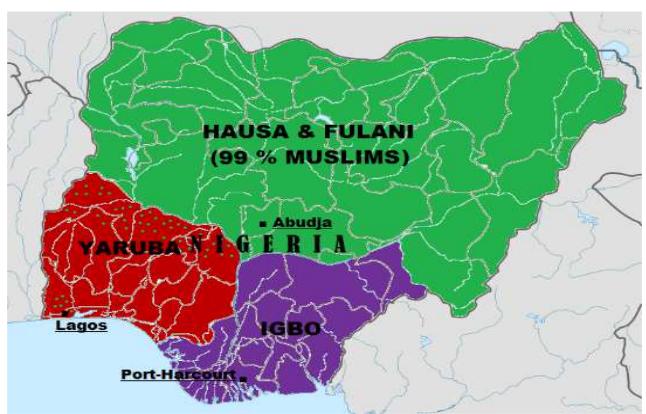
- While the Igbo's are in the Southeast region. They represent 20% of the population, with 98% Christians and 1.80% from the ancestral religion.

These statistics shows us a strong domination of the Islamic religion with about 61% against 35% of Christians and 5% of the traditional religion. Regarding the Catholic Church, Nigeria is organized into 58 dioceses, (23 in the North and 35 in the South) ranged in 8 Ecclesiastical Provinces.

Map of Nigeria



The three major ethnic



Statistics of the presence of Muslims in the regions



II- Context of the persecution of Christians

To talk better about the persecution of Christians in Nigeria, it must first of all be noted that Nigerian law guarantees religious freedom. And until the last 1999 Constitution, which introduced Democracy to the federal state of Nigeria, there is

nothing like State Religion, because Nigeria is a Secular State. In fact, after his independence (October 1, 1960) and the civil war between the Hausas and the Igbo (1967-1970) there was still a good religious relationship between the two main religions, namely Christianity and the Islam. Their different beliefs were not so visible in their quotidian relationship.

Moreover, since the year 2003, the good relationship that have been reigned between the two religions has almost lost its meaning with the birth or the entry of radical Islamist movements, generally called Boko Haram and the Jihadists from the Northern Nigeria. At first, their members claimed to be "**Restorers of Sharia law within all religions of northern Nigeria.**" At that time their attack was only towards the Muslims, in the North of Nigeria: They cut the hands of the one who carries out the act of theft; stoned women accused of adultery; preventing girls from going to school, because according to their Sharia-law, women don't need to be educated intellectually, they are intended for domestic work; they opposed the teaching of Western culture to the youths etc. Around ending of year 2004, their ideology was no longer confined to Muslims, but spread to Christians. **Here is where the violence and the Persecution against Christians started.**

Today, these Islamist groups have instilled in the hearts of the northern Muslims that Christianity is a religion that opposes Allah's precepts and that it stems purely teaching from the Western culture. This is to call all the northern Muslims to violence against the Christians. Since then, churches and their pastors have been frequently targeted and attacked; Many Christian villages and communities are been destroyed, leaving thousands displaced; Army attacks and kidnapping have been increasing; Women are predominantly victims: they are kidnapped and raped. Those kidnapped become sex objects and fabricators of kids. Because they must give birth to a baby "boy" to perpetuate the gangue. But if the newborn is a girl, the girl will be killed immediately.

Indeed, these attacks a result from the expansion of the radical Islamists, Boko Haram and the Fulanis (a people of nomadic herdsmen established in the majority in West and Central Africa Countries, also called the Fulbe). Certainly some Muslims are also affected by all these tragedies, but we must not deny the fact that Boko Haram, according to their leader, wants to eradicate Christians, especially in Nigeria.

With this form of persecution of Christians in Nigeria today, it is possible to talk of a collaboration between Boko Haram, the Fulanis and the federal government

of Nigeria, as the philosopher Bernard Henry Lévi states in the article of Open Doors (NGO). “*At first time, it was thought that these attacks were simply of those who proclaim themselves to be members of Boko Haram, but when the government tried to stop Boko Haram several years ago, the Fulanis stepped up their attacks in the northern and Center part of the country, in the name of conflict between 'the herdsmen and the farmers'. And now some Fulanis are doing exactly the same thing as Boko Haram, it suggests there is a connection. As for the government, it lets things happen: the murders continue*”. And the worst part is that the federal government through the voice of the Minister of Communication asserts that these radical Islamist groups are not terrorists. But bandits who are seeking for their daily bread through those attacks. So the government go ahead asking that they will be amnesties and integrated into the army forces and the civil service.

Of course, Nigeria is not an Islamic State, but it's important to remind us that political, administrative and military power are in the hands of Muslims. Faced with this reality, the Christians, not only that they are the minority, but above all that they undergo the influence of Muslims in all plan. They are often seen as inferior people in the Nigerian society, especially the northern Christians. The northern Christians don't have much access to public administrative. Suddenly, many are farmers. But because of their inferiority before the Muslims, their plantations are always destroyed and devastated by the Fulani's cattle. And this always rise-up a great conflicts between the farmers and the Fulani herdsmen. And when the Christians try to ravage, the result will be that their churches will be set on fire by these radical Islamist Fulanis, who attack the Christians with weapons during their church service.

With this situation many Christians in Nigeria today find it difficult to express freely their faith with freedom.

Concerning the Christians in the South West of Nigeria, we can say that they are generally marginalized. Since all power is in the hands of Muslims and the majority of administrations are in their control, they attract Christians by offering them job with condition that they become Muslim. This form of persecution has more effect with the Yoruba's who lose their Christian faith and convert to Islam, in a way to get a job or get a financial assistance. The major reason they give (the Yoruba's) is because of their precarious situation in the society. We remind that 70% of Nigerians living outside their country are Christians. This's because they don't have much chance to be inserted into the public service in Nigeria.

We would like to point out that apart from the radical Islamist groups who persecute Christians in the North, and the marginalization suffered by those in the Southwest and South-south, there are also some groups of bandits who terrorize priests, nuns and pastors in the South East of Nigeria. According to those groups, the religious have great possessions and seeing their standard of living, it shows that they can get somethings from them. That's why they are often kidnapped by these bandits, hoping for ransoms (money) for their release. And if the institute or the diocese, or even the family of this kidnapped religious does not immediately pay the ransom demanded by his captors, they will kill him.

III- Proposal

In sum, it is worth noting that Christians pay a heavy price for bad governance and insecurity in many parts of Africa and Nigeria in particular. The four main actors of persecution, violence and discrimination against Christians in Nigeria are: Radical Islamist groups, better known by Boko Haram; The Muslim Fulani herdsmen; the political and religious Muslim powers and finally, the highway Bandits in the Eastern part. According to the statistics from the Protestant Evangelical Association Doors Open (NGO), at least 2,983 Christians were killed for reasons related to their faith in Nigeria, between 2018 and 2019. This same association subsequently recorded 3,530 Christians killed and over 1.3 million displaced in Nigeria only in the year 2020. This expresses a high increase in persecution of Christians in Nigeria.

To this end, our Christian brothers and sisters in Nigeria need more than ever moral, spiritual and psychological assistance, even financial assistance, to face their situation today. Thus a visit to this land where our brothers are persecuted, will not only be a starting point for making contact with them and the local bishops to better understand their situation, but also an update of our Trinitarian charism.

Théophile De Paraclete

Nigeria (SIT)