

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 13, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken  
Secretary  
United States Department of State  
2201 C St NW  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

On November 17, the Department of State released its annual list of countries which merit designation as Countries of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. These countries represent the worst violators of religious freedom in the world and count China, Iran, and North Korea among their ranks. Today, we write to express our deep concern that Nigeria has been omitted altogether from this year's list.

Religious people in Nigeria face severe persecution at the hands of radical terrorist groups and even their own government. In fact, more Christians are murdered for their faith in Nigeria than in any other country. Violent attacks against religious congregations perpetrated by Boko Haram, Islamic State-West Africa, and others target Christians and Muslims alike. Not only has the government of Nigeria failed to take meaningful steps to mitigate such violence, but Nigerian authorities restrict and crack down on religious minorities and detain individuals indefinitely on blasphemy-related charges. Despite its constitution protecting freedom of religion and belief, Nigeria's record on religious freedom is, in a word, abysmal.

These atrocities committed against religious people finally earned Nigeria its designation as a Country of Particular Concern last year. The Department of State's designation recognized that conditions had escalated since 2019, when Nigeria was first included on the Department's Special Watch List for severe violators. Additionally, this designation aligned with action that has been recommended by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) since 2009.

Yet this year, without explanation, the Department of State has removed Nigeria completely from its lists of severe religious freedom violators. We find this development alarming given Nigeria's appalling record. While much of the violence in Nigeria overlaps with ethnic conflicts, hostility between ethnic groups is not solely to blame. Religious intolerance and persecution is a primary factor, and it is important that the State Department acknowledge that. It is clear to us that religious freedom conditions in Nigeria have not seen consummate improvement to warrant this abrupt change in designation after such a brief period. Therefore, we urge the Department to immediately reconsider its decision and redesignate Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern.

In addition, please provide responses to the following questions no later than two weeks from your receipt of this letter:

1. *Why did the Department of State remove Nigeria not only from its list of Countries of Particular Concern, but also from its Special Watch List? Please provide the Department's specific reasoning for this decision.*
2. *Which criteria were used to make the Department's decision? Were factors not related to religious freedom considered in the decision-making process?*
3. *How does the Department's decision comply with the statutory requirements under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, specifically the requirement in 22 U.S.C. § 6442(b)(1)(B) for the president to fully consider the CPC recommendations of USCIRF when making CPC determinations?*
4. *Was the substance and/or timing of the Department's announcement made with regard to any official state travel by you or any other official in the Biden Administration?*

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



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Josh Hawley  
United States Senator



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James Lankford  
United States Senator



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Kevin Cramer  
United States Senator



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Mike Braun  
United States Senator



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James M. Inhofe  
United States Senator



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Tom Cotton  
United States Senator



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Marco Rubio  
United States Senator