



# **Nigerian Physicians Advocacy Group (NPAG) Policy Statement on Nigeria's CPC Designation: A Call for Partnership Over Punishment**

*By the Nigerian Physicians Advocacy Group*

Nigeria has once again made international headlines with its designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for religious freedom violations. While the gravity of religious persecution in Nigeria cannot be understated, the Nigerian Physicians Advocacy Group (NPAG) believes this designation risks undermining rather than supporting Nigeria's efforts to address its complex security challenges. We call for a collaborative partnership between the United States and Nigeria, one that strengthens rather than handicaps Nigeria's capacity to confront its internal conflicts.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE CPC DESIGNATION**

Under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998, the U.S. President is required to annually review the status of religious freedom in every country and designate as a Country of Particular Concern any nation whose government has engaged in or tolerated 'particularly severe violations of religious freedom.' The law defines these violations as 'systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom, including torture, prolonged detention without charges, forced disappearance, or flagrant denial of life, liberty, or security of persons.'

## **NIGERIA'S HISTORY WITH THE CPC LIST**

Nigeria is no stranger to this list. The country was first designated a CPC in 2020 under the Trump administration, removed from the list in 2021 under the Biden administration despite pressure from humanitarian groups, and redesignated in 2025 following President Trump's October 31st declaration citing what he called 'the existential threat facing Christianity in Nigeria and the mass slaughters caused by radical Islamists', claims the Nigerian government has vehemently rejected.

## **WHO WE ARE**

The Nigerian Physicians Advocacy Group was founded in 2019 as a 501c4 advocacy organization of diaspora physicians who, after decades of medical mission work in Nigeria, recognized the critical link between good governance and healthcare infrastructure. We understand that effective healthcare requires not only electricity and clean water, but also security and economic stability.

## CLARIFYING OUR POSITION:

Before we address the implications of the CPC designation, we must be clear about our stance: the Nigerian Physicians Advocacy Group does not minimize the egregious killings of Christians and of Muslims in Nigeria. These deaths are heinous and represent unnecessary casualties of a complex crisis. These deaths require urgent action and attention.

We understand that the United States recognizes these killings, though the focus has been partial to Christian casualties, which is what prompted the CPC designation. However, we believe that effective intervention requires a full and accurate diagnosis of their sources. Just as physicians cannot treat a disease without proper diagnosis, policymakers cannot solve a crisis they do not fully understand.

**Our concern is that the CPC designation and its consequences, including sanctions, aid cancellations, and diplomatic strain, lead to missed opportunities for true diplomacy between Nigeria and the United States to collaboratively solve these issues. Rather than creating conditions for partnership and problem-solving, the designation risks creating an adversarial dynamic that undermines the very cooperation needed to address the root causes of violence.**

## THE REAL CONSEQUENCES OF CPC DESIGNATION

Being placed on the CPC list carries serious implications that could further destabilize Nigeria:

- **Diplomatic Pressure:** Formal U.S. condemnation strains bilateral relations and becomes a focal point in international discussions.
- **Economic Sanctions:** Targeted trade restrictions, aid suspensions, and export controls that hurt the economy.
- **Military Handicaps:** Restrictions on military sales that impair Nigeria's ability to combat terrorism.
- **Lost Development Aid:** Denial of U.S. developmental assistance and opposition to loans from institutions like the World Bank and IMF.
- **Reputational Damage:** Discouragement of foreign investment, tourism (including medical tourism), and international partnerships, as multinational corporations may avoid doing business in Nigeria.

## THE PARADOX OF PUNISHMENT: CANCELED AID PROGRAMS

In June 2025, the Nigerian Physicians Advocacy Group held a lobby day on Capitol Hill, meeting with congressional leaders including the office of Congressman Chris Smith. Our message was clear: we need a more nuanced narrative about the drivers of ethno-religious violence in Nigeria, and more partnership rather than punitive action.

During a House Foreign Affairs Committee meeting on March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2025 discussing 'The Conflict and Persecution in Nigeria: The Case for a CPC Designation,' Representative Sara Jacobs, ranking member of the committee, articulated concerns that align with our position. She stated:

*"I am also concerned by the state of freedom of religion or belief in Nigeria. However, we need to be careful in our characterization of this complex challenge, where roughly half the population is Muslim while the other half is Christian, and violations of this freedom impact both groups. Oversimplistic narratives about the violence perpetuate harmful stereotypes and motivate tensions and violence based on religious identity."*

Representative Jacobs further highlighted a critical contradiction: while the Trump administration designated Nigeria as a CPC, it simultaneously canceled the very programs that were effectively addressing the root causes of conflict:

- All peace, democracy, and governance activities worth \$74 million including programs that improved conflict response, bolstered the justice system, and facilitated dialogue
- All education and economic growth programs totaling \$170 million including projects addressing the root causes of conflict and violence
- Humanitarian assistance that was helping war and conflict survivors
- Programs that kept clinics open and provided over 2 million Nigerians with access to HIV medication

In total, President Trump canceled 54 foreign assistance programs in Nigeria. Representative Jacobs rightly observed: "We cannot ignore the other tools in our toolbox, especially foreign assistance, which has been effective at supporting Nigerians with addressing the key drivers of conflict and religious freedom violations for years."

## A MORE COMPLETE DIAGNOSIS: EXPERT TESTIMONY

Ms. Oge Onubogu, Director of the Africa Program at the Wilson Center and an expert with over 20 years of experience on peace, security, and governance issues in Africa, provided enlightening testimony during the same congressional hearing. Her analysis resonates deeply with our understanding as a diaspora organization intimately familiar with Nigeria.

Ms. Onubogu explained that Nigeria faces "several different but overlapping security crises." According to the 2025 Global Terrorism Index, Nigeria now ranks sixth, up from eighth in 2023 and 2024. Critically, she identified the core problem:

*"Whether labeled as banditry, or terrorism, or communal clashes, or ethno-religious conflict, at the root of the violence is a failure of governance to meet the population's most basic needs—not only livelihoods, education, and healthcare, but their need for perpetrators to be held legitimately accountable."*

As physicians, we understand the importance of accurate diagnosis before treatment. The lack of nuance in the CPC designation perpetuates an incomplete narrative that leads to an incomplete diagnosis of the issue. Ms. Onubogu wisely cautioned: "It is unproductive to label a conflict as solely driven by religion when there are other factors at play." We must not dismiss the religious aspect, but neither should we ignore the governance failures, economic deprivation, and accountability gaps that fuel violence.

## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nigerian Physicians Advocacy Group (NPAG) endorses Ms. Onubogu's recommendations given during her testimony to the United States government and add our own call to action:

### **To the United States Government:**

- Reinstatement of the 54 canceled foreign assistance programs in Nigeria that were proven effective in addressing root causes of conflict
- Continue and expand humanitarian support to communities affected by violence, including medical care, emergency relief, and support for displaced populations, ensuring aid reaches those most in need regardless of religious affiliation.
- Engage deeply and broadly with communities across Nigeria to better understand the nuances driving the conflicts; this cannot be overstated
- Prioritize a holistic, long-term vision for engagement with Nigeria on issues of governance and security
- Decentralize engagement by strengthening dialogue with receptive government and civic leaders at state and local levels
- Support democratic actors advancing inclusive peace processes and conflict resolution

- Partner with Nigerian diaspora organizations who serve as bridges and channels of influence and communication.
- Work with the Nigerian government to make accountability central to the response to conflict and persecution.
- Rethink policies that lead to knee-jerk responses to crises; the CPC designation risks being exactly such a response that undermines the support Nigeria truly needs
- Revive the bipartisan U.S. Congressional Caucus on Nigeria

#### **To the Nigerian Government:**

**We urge the immediate appointment of a Nigerian ambassador to the United States. It has been over two years since Nigeria recalled its ambassador from Washington. Nigeria desperately needs senior diplomatic representation in these critical talks and conversations regarding the CPC designation and U.S.-Nigeria relations.**

Beyond diplomatic representation, NPAG implores the Nigerian government to act with renewed intensity on the insecurity and economic hardships facing Nigerians that breed this kind of tension and violence. While we recognize the Tinubu administration's stated efforts to improve security, the scale and persistence of the crisis demand a more significant and comprehensive overhaul. This has been a long-time stain on Nigeria, and truly revolutionary action from the government is overdue. Specifically, we call on the Nigerian government to:

- Actively improve the living conditions of all Nigerians through investments in infrastructure, healthcare, education, and economic opportunity as a top priority.
- **Openly and consistently condemn all acts of violence and terrorism, regardless of the perpetrators' identity or the victims' faith**
- Uphold justice for all citizens by ensuring swift and consistent accountability for perpetrators of violence and strengthening the rule of law.
- Prioritize transparency in security operations and governance to rebuild public trust
- Address the governance failures that Ms. Onubogu identified as being at the root of violence, ensuring that government meets the population's most basic needs for livelihoods, education, healthcare, and legitimate accountability
- Deploy the full capacity of Nigeria's military and security forces to actively combat insurgency, banditry, and criminality in all its forms, demonstrating that the government has both the capability and political will to eradicate these threats and provide safety for all citizens

The Nigerian government must recognize that its credibility on the international stage is directly tied to its treatment of its own citizens. Without meaningful action on these fronts, diplomatic protests against designations like the CPC will ring hollow.

#### **To the Nigerian Diaspora & its organizations:**

Now is not the time to be silent. Our collective voices must be heard in this narrative, to push back on what is incorrect and to support what is correct. Our silence is complicity, and it is no longer acceptable if Nigeria is the country we all claim to love.

### **CONCLUSION: PARTNERSHIP OVER PUNISHMENT**

The path forward requires partnership, not punishment. It requires nuanced understanding, not oversimplification. It requires sustained engagement and support, not withdrawal and sanctions. The Nigerian Physicians Advocacy Group stands ready to serve as a bridge in this effort, and we call on all stakeholders, American, Nigerian, and diaspora alike, to choose collaboration over condemnation.

Nigeria's challenges are real and serious, but they demand solutions that strengthen rather than weaken the nation's capacity to address them. For the sake of Nigeria's future and the well-being of all its citizens, regardless of faith, we must chart a better course.

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