



Aid to
Church
ACN INTE



COUNTRY REPORT



Nigeria at the crossroads

PONTIFICAL
FOUNDATION



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Pontifical Foundation

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Unless otherwise stated, the information in this document has been compiled using information obtained during research trips and interviews with local partners over the past 6 years.

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» Nigeria at the crossroads



Area

923,768 Km²

Flag



Population

206 million

Languages: English (official).
Others: Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo (Ibo), Fulani, Ibibio, Tiv, Birom, Kanuri and over 500 additional indigenous languages

Federal Capital Territory (FCT)

Abuja

Economical Capital

Lagos

Political system

Federal presidential republic

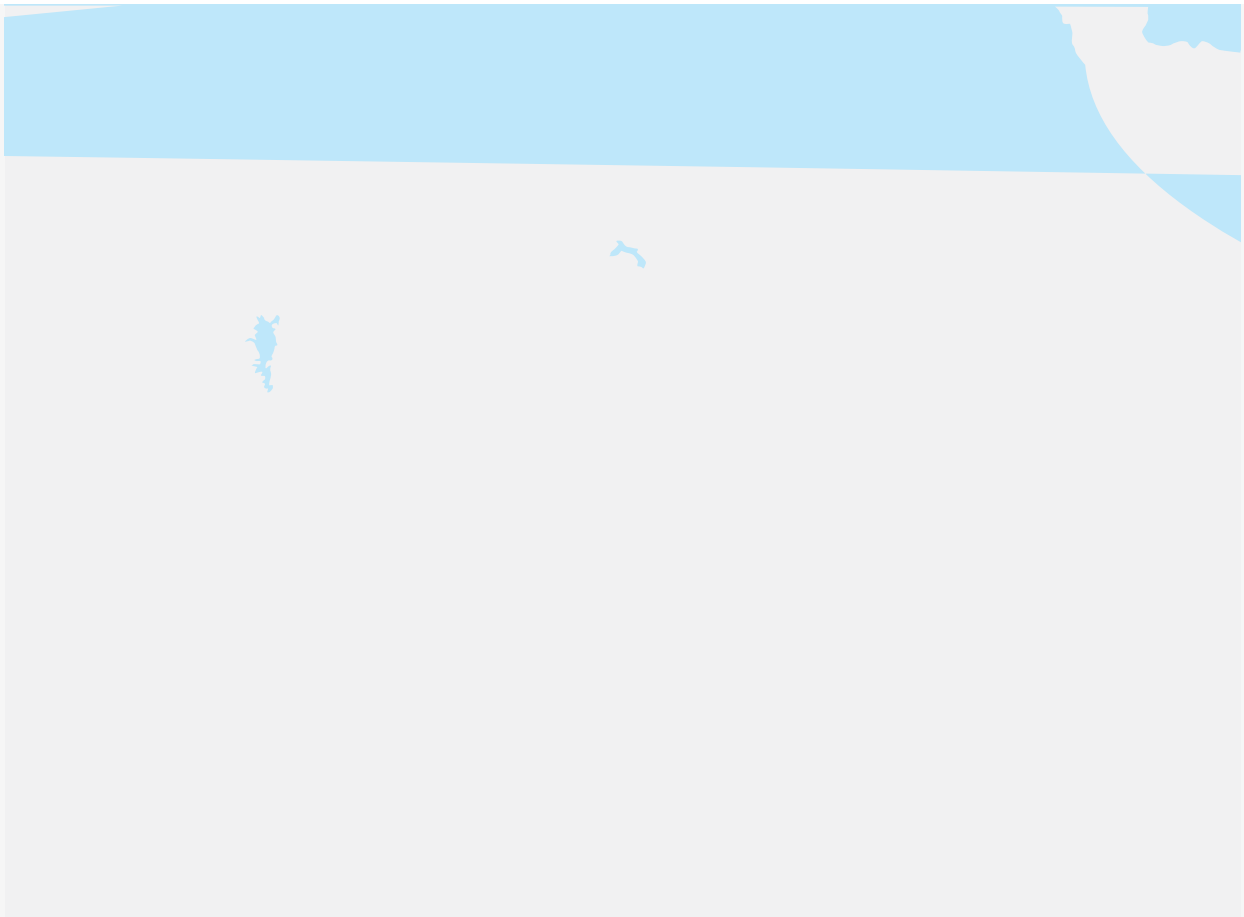


Photo: Emmanuel Ikwuegbu | Unsplash

1. General overview

- Nigeria is located in western Africa and borders Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.
- The name Nigeria was taken from the Niger River that runs through the country.
- The flag: Three equal vertical bands of green, white, and green; the color green represents the forests and natural wealth of the country, white symbolizes peace and unity.
- Ruled by the British since 1914, Nigeria attained independence in 1960. The adoption of a new constitution in 1999 completed a peaceful transition to civilian rule.
- It is Africa's most populous country (206 million). The highest density areas are in the south and south-west. The major urban areas by population were estimated in 2021 to be Lagos (14.862 million), Kano (4.103 million), Ibadan (3.649 million), Abuja (3.464 million), Port Harcourt (3.171 million) and Benin City (1.782 million).
- Nigeria is estimated to have over 250 ethnic groups: Hausa 30%, Yoruba 15.5%, Igbo (Ibo) 15.2%, Fulani 6%, Tiv 2.4%, Kanuri/Berberi 2.4%, Ibibio 1.8%, Ijaw/Izon 1.8%, other 24.9% (2018 est.)
- President: Muhammadu Buhari (born December 1942). A retired Nigerian Army major general, Buhari was formerly Head of State of Nigeria from 31 December 1983 to 27 August 1985, after taking power in a military coup d'état.

1.1. Short contemporary history timeline



1.3. The North-South Axis

Nigeria is by no means a homogeneous country. Over 250 ethnic groups and indigenous languages express the diversity and richness of the country.

To understand the situation in the country it is very important to speak about a prevailing international typecasting between the north and the south of the country. Some Nigerians speak from a position of “geographical ignorance” between both parts¹. Many South Nigerians believe that there are no Christians in the North, even if states like Gombe or Kaduna have a Christian population of almost 50% and in Borno, the cradle of Boko Haram, 30% of the population is Christian.

The major ethnic groups are also geographically divided: the Hausa, the Fulani and the Kanuri are dominant in the north and Yoruba, Igbo and Tiv in the south.

Before the arrival of British power, north, south, west, and east had different idiosyncrasies and lived their own ethnic, political and religious realities. The first step of British expansion in the

region was the annexation of Lagos in 1861. In 1885, at the Berlin Conference, Britain claimed rights to the Niger Basin. In 1906 the British amalgamated the Lagos Colony and Protectorate with the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria to form the new Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. In 1914 these territories in the south were united with the protectorate of Northern Nigeria, giving birth to the geo-political unit that we now know as Nigeria.

However, the territories maintained their regional authorities, divided after 1914 into three local units. The announcement of their dissolution by the military government after the first coup in 1966 triggered violent reactions in the north against southerners who had settled among them. This was one of the factors that contributed to the outbreak of the civil war.

The antagonism between the north and the south suffered a se-

Considering the division into states from the political and administrative angle, Adawama or Taraba are two states of the North-East Region, even if to an observer they would be clearly in the center. Also, Abuja, the capital, is considered part of the north of the country.

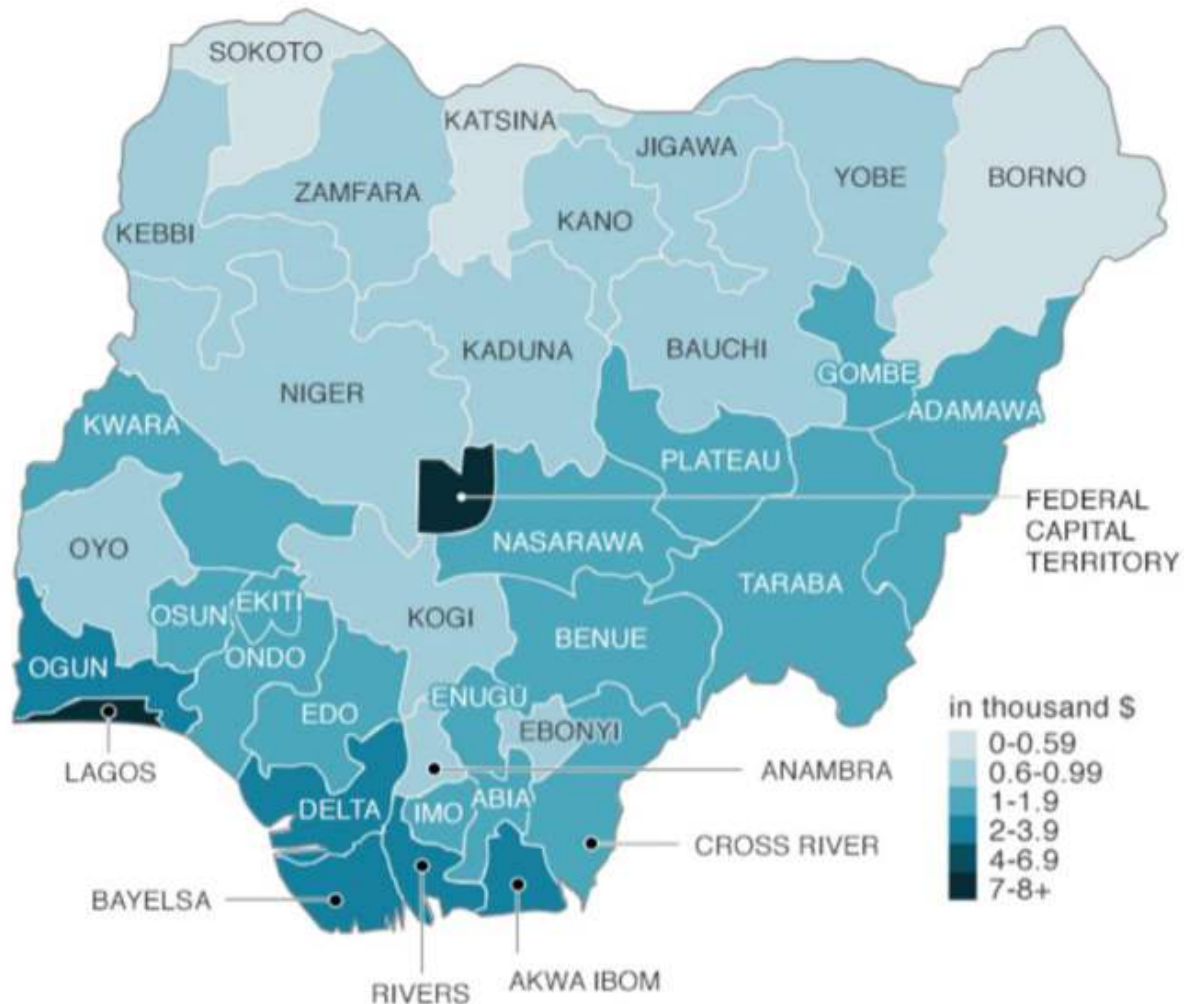
Perhaps due to this mismatch with reality, there is a very important geographical term often used by the media: Nigeria's Middle Belt, which refers to the area that bisects the country from east to west, along the center, forming a transition zone between northern and southern Nigeria. It includes most of the North-Central Region and the southern half of the North-Eastern Region. Characterized by a large mix of ethnicities – 50 to 100 separate languages and ethnic groups – it is a meeting point between two worlds and the scene of frequent incidents in our days.

130 million Nigerians live below the poverty line. The south is richer, has more universities, and is better educated. The south also includes the oil reservoir and the financial capital, Lagos. The political center is in the north, where 46% of the population lives, while 53% live in the south. Population density is higher in the south, though the surface is smaller.

Southerners often complain about resource distribution, which is subjected to centralization by the central power. Some places, like Delta State, are far less developed, even though they have oil reservoirs.

Figures and numbers of both religious and ethnic groups have often been manipulated for propaganda, as well as political and power conflicts.

Average annual income per person in \$



Source: Nigeria Bureau of Statistics



2.1 Religious Freedom ³

Nigeria guarantees religious freedom. Under Article 15 of the Nigerian Constitution, no person may be discriminated against on grounds of his or her religious affiliation. Article 10 stipulates that neither Nigeria as a Federal Republic, nor any of its individual states, may adopt a state religion.

Beyond this, Article 38 (I) of the Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of thought and religion, including the right to freely practice one's faith, propagate it through religious instruction, and convert to another faith. Article 38 (II) says that no one may be compelled to participate in religious instruction against his or her will if the instruction is not in accordance with that person's faith. This guarantee also extends to religious observances.

In the effort to promote social inclusion, Article 15 (3, c and d) of the Constitution places the state under an obligation to foster inter-religious marriages and to promote the establishment of associations and groups for members of different religions. Article 222 (e) also prohibits political parties from identifying with any particular religion or region.

Nigeria has a mixed legal system with four separate sources, namely English law, common law, customary law, and, in a number of states, Islamic law (Sharia). Pursuant to Article 275 of the Nigerian Constitution, states are entitled to empanel a Sharia Court of Appeal.

2.2. Sharia Law

Sharia is Islamic canonical law, based on the teachings of the Koran and the traditions of Mohammed (Hadith and Sunna), prescribing both religious and secular duties and sometimes retributive penalties for lawbreaking.

Sharia Law is a system of duties and obligations that rule all facets of Muslim life, and includes personal and public behavior, the observance of religious life, but also family and business issues. Islamic laws are based on Sharia interpretations.

Islamic law em.864 TmD 3(t)2sBDCas a mons.



2.3. Catholic Church in Nigeria

It is said that the majority of Christians live in the south, but dioceses like Jalingo, Jos and Benue, in north and central Nigeria, are majority Christian, and others, like Kaduna, Abuja and Nassarawa are estimated to be about half Christian. On the other hand Kwara, which is in the south, is only around 40% Christian.

The Yoruba area in the west has traditionally been Protestant and Anglican, whereas Igboland in the east has always been the area of greatest activity of the Catholic Church. Out of all Christians: 64% are protestant and 25% are Catholic. There are many small African Churches that broke off from Protestant denominations.

Apart from Benin and Warri, in the Niger Delta, which had come

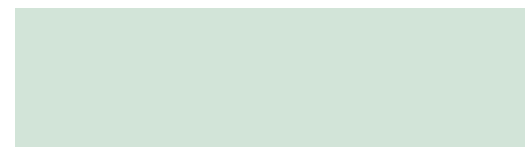
into contact with Christianity through the Portuguese in the 15th century, other regions only had contact with Christians in the 19th century.

The colonial British rulers established a regulation that Christians could not proselytize in the northern Muslim region, but small missionary activities were allowed to start up in the Middle Belt in the 1920s. Reading the history of the beginnings of the archdioceses in Kaduna, for example, one discovers a close link between the development of the railway and the arrival of the first priests, many of them Irish, in the north of the country.

The Catholic Church has done, and continues to do, immense work for inter-religious and inter-ethnic dialogue in the country. The bishops in the north, especially, are peacemakers and community builders.

Catholic Church at a glance

Workforce for the Church's apostolate



Catholic Church at a glance

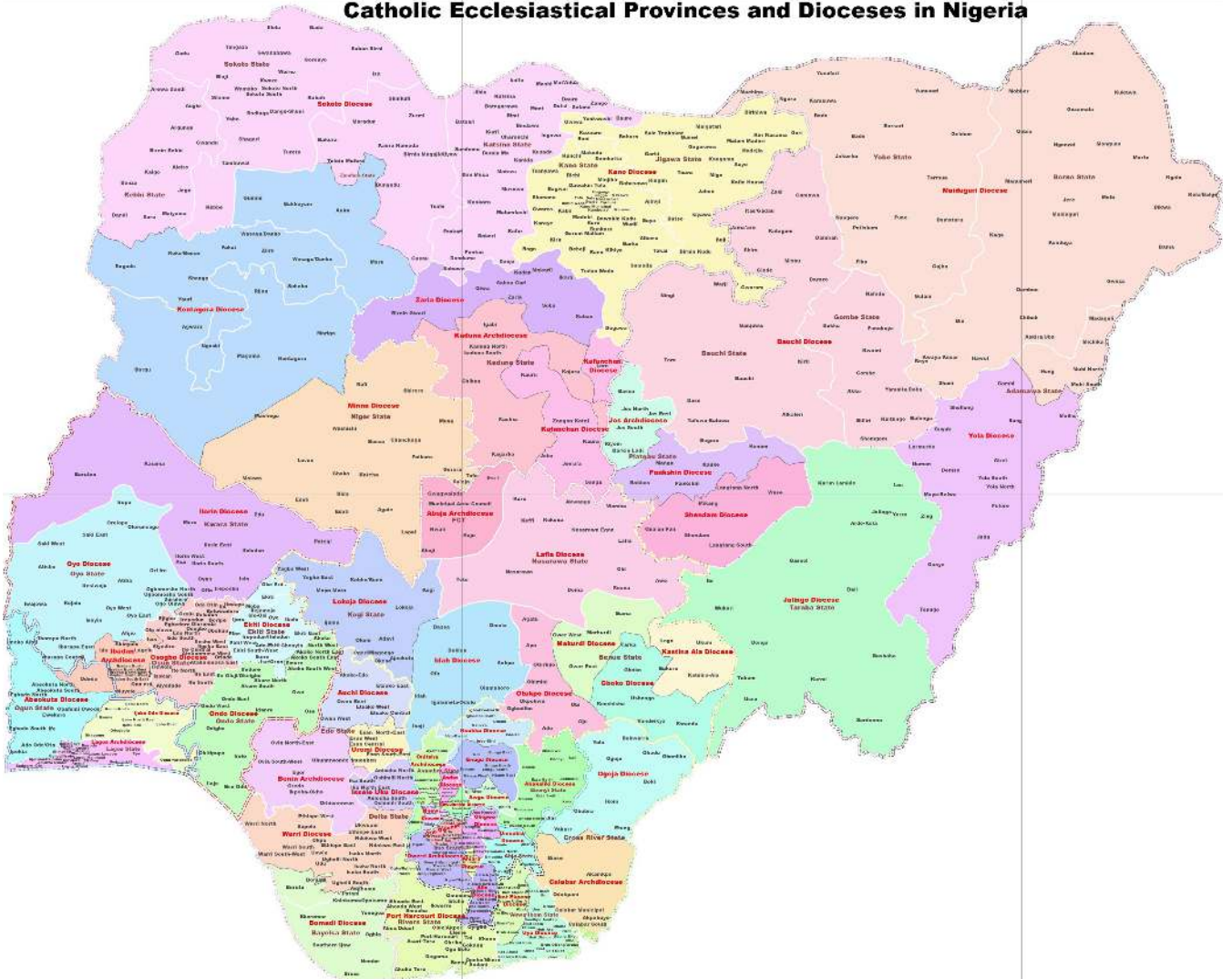
KINDERGARDENS

PRIMARY OR ELEMENTARY
SCHOOLS

Catholic Ecclesiastical Provinces and Dioceses in Nigeria

Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN) - 2022

Catholic Ecclesiastical Provinces and Dioceses in Nigeria



Archdioceses and their correspondent depending dioceses in Nigeria⁶

Abuja: Gboko, Idah, Katsina-Ala, Lafia, Lokoja, Makurdi, Otukpo

Benin City: Auchi, Bomadi, Issele-Uku, Uromi, Warri

Calabar: Ikot Ekpene, Ogoja, Port Harcourt, Uyo

Ibadan: Ekiti, Ilorin, Ondo, Osogbo, Oyo

Jos: Bauchi, Jalingo, Maiduguri, Pankshin, Shendam, Wukari, Yola

Kaduna: Kafanchan, Kano, Kontagora, Minna, Sokoto, Zaria

Lagos: Abeokuta, Ijebu-Ode

Onitsha: Abakaliki, Awgu, Awka, Ekwulobia, Enugu, Nnewi, Nsukka

Owerri: Aba, Ahiara, Okigwe, Orlu, Umuahia

Furthermore, independent: Maronite Eparchy Our Lady of the Annunciation at Ibadan

2.4. Discrimination of Christians in North Nigeria

The current situation in Nigeria has created great tensions, and made the nation politically polarized. Decisions, statements, and appointments of political leaders make many Nigerians question the unity of the country. Nigeria's Constitution recognizes the principle of the federal character, which means that all the country's sectors must be represented in the administration of Federal Institutions. However, this is not the case.

One of the biggest concerns in the country is the concentration of political and military power in the hands of Muslims, and particularly in the same ethnic family: the Hausa-Fulani. All the officials who advise the President are Hausa-Fulani, almost 95 percent of political and military power is concentrated in Muslim hands, in a country which is about 50 percent Christian. Non-Muslims in the country often complain that the security sector is run by one religious group and one ethnic group, in what it is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation.

Christians in the north of the country, in particular, speak of systemic and deeply rooted discrimination based on religion.

Under the Constitution, Nigeria has freedom of religion, including the freedom to change religion, to practice alone or in community, in private or in public. Christians should not be bound or forced to follow Islamic law, but in the north Christians often feel discriminated against by legislation that targets certain "social vices" and "un-Islamic behavior".

Here are the sticking points compiled by ACN during fact-finding trips to northern Nigeria and interviews with local Christians, over the past few years, who claim to feel like second-class citizens:

Second-class citizens:

- Denial of access to political businesses, political exclusion
-



“There is no equity. There is subtle persecution, which is even more dangerous”

ACN has been highlighting the plight of Christians in Nigeria for many years, with growing concern, and has singled the country out as one of the most dangerous for Christians in the world. The Global Terrorism Index 2022 ranked Nigeria in 6th place (after Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Burkina Faso, and Syria) and in the Global Peace Index 2022 it ranked 143rd out of 163 countries.

Nigeria's long-standing security challenges are immense and varied in terms of reasons and geography. The situation has become increasingly complicated over the past ten years. An important driver in all cases is the poor social, cultural and educational condition of the Nigerian population, as well as political mismanagement and corruption. But there are religious and ethnic implications in some of the conflicts as well.

According to Church leaders, the Government has failed to take appropriate action to stem interreligious and interethnic criminality.

“The government has failed us completely; it is the absence of good government that is causing this. Bandits, Boko Haram, kidnappings, these are all symptoms of injustice, of the corruption that is in the system. Our leaders steal our money and take it to the West. Unless we can get to the root of the issue, we will be fighting a losing battle”, said Matthew Man-Oso Ndagoso, Archbishop of Kaduna.

When speaking about violence and conflicts in Nigeria, it is important to understand the different conflicts and the areas of impact. Attacks in Nigeria come from many different directions, and it is often difficult to understand the limits between outright persecution, Islamic extremism, historical ethnic rivalries, and simple banditry.

Boko Haram fighters, bandits or Fulani?

“We look to God for safety, hoping he will fight for us”

A group of armed men attacked a Catholic and a Baptist Church in Rubuh, in Kaduna State. Local Catholic catechist Emmanuel Joseph witnessed the whole thing.

“Mass had just started when we heard guns firing. Parishioners started running everywhere, chairs were broken in the process, and some were hurt trying to get away. Coming into the church compound, they shot three members who had left the church: a married couple, who left seven children behind, and a young man, who left a wife and three children. They also attacked the local Baptist church, and abducted 36 members of the congregation, mostly women, and killed a man there also.”

According to some of the hostages who were released, the attackers were members of the mostly Muslim Fulani tribe, a nomadic group that often attacks farmers over land disputes. However, the same witnesses say that they dressed just like Boko Haram, which indicates that the terrorist group may be influencing them and aggravating the age-old land dispute.

Emmanuel Joseph says that Kaduna state has not been peaceful since the introduction of Sharia law in 2000. *“There has been a series of attacks, especially on Catholic priests, Catholic worshippers, and Christians in general, and the government is doing nothing to help. Due to Fulani terrorist attacks, we sleep with one eye open.”*

However, the people have not lost their faith. *“With all that has been happening in the state, including constant attacks on the Christian faithful in the Rubuh community, we are weak and tired, and we are beginning to be scared too. We are only focused on how to stay alive, looking upon God for safety in the belief that He will fight back for us.”*



Pentecost Sunday Massacre

The Pentecost Sunday Massacre in Owo shows how these lines are often blurred. Nigerian authorities blame the Islamic State and other Islamic terrorist groups while the local population believes Fulani herdsmen played a role in the attack. Also, the attack in Roboh, Kaduna state, was carried out by unidentified perpetrators.

On 5 June 2022, Pentecost Sunday, armed men attacked St. Francis Xavier Church in Owo, Ondo Diocese, killing around 40 people and injuring more than 80.

The massacre took place in the southwest of Nigeria, a place that hasn't been affected until now by the insecurity and violence which generally affect the north and the Middle Belt.

Fr Andrew Abayomi was still in the building when the attack took place. In an interview with ACN he recalled the moment: "I heard a noise. I thought it was a door slamming, or that someone had fallen, or seen a snake, because that has happened before. But then I heard a second loud noise, and I saw parishioners running in different directions in the church. I stood there in shock, wondering what was going on, when someone ran to me, yelling: 'Father, unknown gunmen!'"

"I remained in the inner part of the sacristy. I could not run as I was surrounded by children, while some adults hung to

me, some even inside my chasuble. I shielded them just as a hen shields her chicks. I heard the voices of my parishioners: 'Father, please save us; Father, pray!' I encouraged them and calmed them, and said they should not worry, that I was praying, and that God would do something. I heard three or four explosions, one after the other."

Parishioner Thaddeus Bade Salau was shot but survived. *"I was in church when the incident happened. I was lying down on the ground until one of the gunmen had me stand up along with nine other parishioners, including my beautiful daughter. They shot all of us, one after the other. I was the last to be shot, and I was hit in the cheek. I was the only*

3.1. Militant Islamists

Area affected: predominantly active in the north-east, moving into north-western states.

Root of the conflict: religious ideology, to impose the strictest version of Islam.

Boko Haram and ISWAP militants are the protagonists of the violence. Most events involving Islamist militants occurred in Borno state, where the group has traditionally been active. It once controlled an area of the size of Belgium but military campaign

BOKO HARAM:



3.2. Violence related to armed bandits and crime

Area affected: the North-West and North-Central Regions

Root of the conflict: profit and robbery

Lack of governance and widespread poverty have led to the proliferation of banditry, with some reports suggesting that there are as many as 30,000 bandits in the area, in 100 gangs. Some gangs could have as many as 2,000 members.

Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between the armed groups with regional political ambitions and economic interests and the Islamists. Some armed groups that have been infiltrated by Al-Qaeda or ISIS, and incited by radical preachers, seek to impose the strictest version of Islam, including through violence.

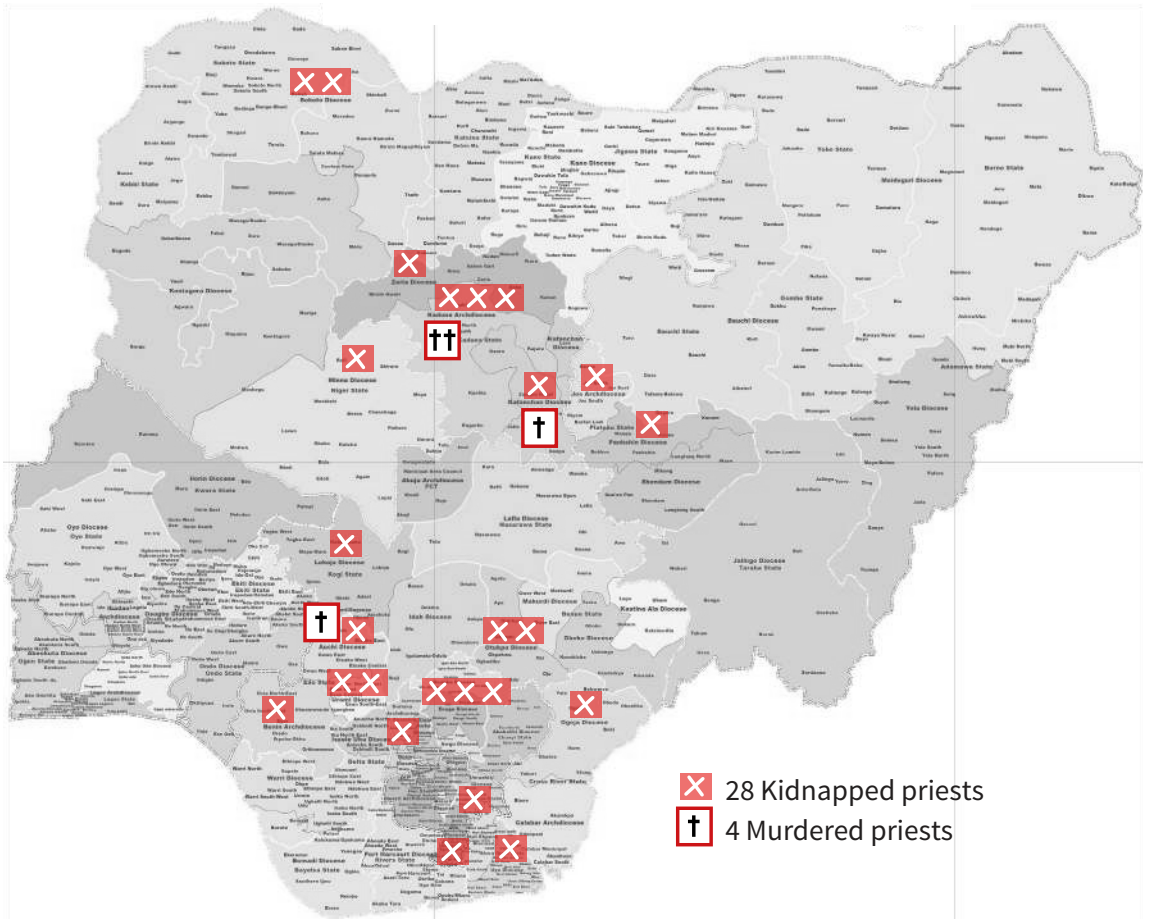
Over the past seven years, the North-West and North-Central Regions have experienced the greatest concentration of kidnappings in the country. The ransoms collected through the abductions – some of them massive – have become a business for criminal gangs.

There have also been reports of links between armed bandits and Islamist terrorist groups for economic reasons. One of the

victims, kidnapped in 2020 in Kaduna by bandits, told ACN in a confidential interview that the first idea of the criminals was to sell them to Boko Haram (in exchange for weapons) but after some days they decided to ask their families for ransom instead.

The state of Kaduna has been one of the hardest-hit by the wave of violence and criminality that is sweeping large parts of Nigeria.

“In the past three and a half years, eight of my priests have been kidnapped, two have been killed, and one has been in captivity for nearly four years. Five were released. In fifty of my parishes, priests cannot stay in their rectories, because they are targets, they are seen as an easy source of money for ransom. I cannot go on pastoral visits like I usually do, priests cannot go to villages(wer)4a



Priests and nuns in Nigeria are “not for sale”

Dozens of priests and nuns have been kidnapped in Nigeria over the past years, including a bishop at the end of 2020.

Moses Chikwe, of the Diocese of Awerri, was released, but his kidnapping raised waves and called attention to the plight of so many other religious leaders and even regular citizens.

“Kidnappings have been going on for a long time in Nigeria, people thought it would not happen to religious leaders. So,

STORY

Besides dozens of kidnappings, a total of four priests were murdered in Nigeria during 2022

One of those priests, Fr Mark Cheitnum, was director of communications for the diocese of Kafanchan, and a friend of Aid to the Church in Need.

During a visit by ACN to Kafanchan, in 2017, the late Bishop Joseph Bagobiri and Father Mark met the charity's representatives and explained the terrible impact and increasing number of attacks by Fulani herdsmen terrorists in his diocese, in the southern part of Kaduna State.

Maria Lozano, head of press of ACN International, was part of the delegation, and, on hearing the news, expressed her concern and sadness about the killing of Father Mark: "It is tragic, another priest killed in Nigeria, which brings the total number to four this year alone. Father Mark was deeply engaged in giving a voice to the innocent victims of violence in his diocese, who number in the hundreds, at least. Now he himself has become a victim in this spiral of death."

"The Diocese of Kafanchan has been suffering from terror and violence for many years. I remember that when we visited Bishop Bagobiri and Father Mark there was a curfew and we couldn't spend too much time in the diocese, we had to leave in the afternoon because it was too dangerous. Terror and fear are affecting not just Kafanchan, but the whole state of Kaduna, and the violence has been spreading to Benue and other parts of the Middle Belt."

In a separate message, the directors of communication of the Catholic dioceses in Nigeria urged the government to do whatever is necessary to provide security, protecting the lives and livelihoods of priests in Nigeria.



Original articles:

<https://acninternational.org/ano->

3.3. Conflict between farmers and herders

Area affected: mainly in the Middle Belt but increasingly moving to southern states.

Root of the conflict: Land, though ethnic and religious factors often also come into play.

This conflict is probably the most serious for Nigeria at the moment, since it has resulted in more deaths than those caused by Boko Haram in recent years. It is also one of the most complicated, as it mixes struggles for resources with political, religious and ethnic elements. For this reason, this report devotes more space to it than to the other conflicts.

The roots of this conflict are as old as human history. Access to land and to pasture has been a challenge between nomads and settled communities, and traditionally governed by a delicate balance based on agreements about paths and roads to use.

Originally, the conflict had nothing to do with religion or ethnicity. Lack of natural resources, increasingly dry land, population growth, the need for more farming space, lack of water, but also an increase in cattle population has broken the balance. Also, the fact that clashes used to be fought with spears and arrows, while today some herders are armed with modern weapons, plays a sad roll in the dimension of the conflict.

But in some places, because of the failure of security forces, competition over resources is used as a pretext to kill and maim along ethnic or religious lines. The conflict has also been dangerously politicized by some state government officials who have inflamed tensions by embarking on a blame game along political party lines.

Also, the fact that the Fulani herders are transhumant and not

3.3.2. Political and ethnic dimension

The problem is further complicated by the almost total lack of political reaction. There are many complaints of inaction by the Federal government. The fact that Nigeria's President, Muhammadu Buhari, is a Fulani, has raised suspicions and even accusations of failure to condemn and prosecute systematic attacks by Fulani militias.

The audacity with which they travel to every corner of Nigeria in search of pasture for their livestock is unparalleled, and there are many instances of these herders encroaching on farmland in all parts of the country, armed with rifles and other weapons, and acting with impunity. The lack of meaningful prosecution of these men further fuels the belief that they have the federal government's support. There is no conclusive evidence that this is the case, but the lack of willpower or motivation to stop the rise in these crimes makes it difficult to convince many Nigerians that there is no connection between the unilateral appointment of officials and the failure to prosecute the perpetrators of these

crimes against humanity and what appears to be a selective killing of Christians⁹.

Feelings of injustice and frustration on the part of the victims – due to the impunity of the perpetrators – is immense and in some parts of the country citizen self-defense groups have been created. This factor complicates the conflict even more but has been seen as the only solution to stop the violent attacks of the Fulani herdsmen in many places.

“The scale of killings, displacement and wanton destruction of property by these Fulani jihadist militias only buttresses the now revealed agenda to depopulate Christian communities in Nigeria and take over lands. Tellingly, the government in power in Nigeria at the moment continues to do nothing about these persistent at-



Fulani conflict is above all a religious war, says bishop

During a webinar hosted by Aid to the Church in Need International (ACN), in October 2021, the speakers, among them one bishop and several priests from Nigeria, confirmed that the violence that has been plaguing the country for the past several years is not simply due to “clashes” between Muslim herdsmen and Christian farmers, over land.

“It is not just about issues of grazing. For me, this is a religious war”, stated Bishop Wilfred Anagbe, of the diocese of Makurdi, in Benue state.

“They have an agenda, which is the Islamization of this country. And they are doing that by carefully eliminating all the Christians and occupying the territories. If it was about grazing, why kill people? And why burn their homes?”, he asked.

Johan Viljoen, director of the Denis Hurley Peace Institute of South Africa, and an expert on Fulani armed militia attacks in Southeast Nigeria, spoke of a *“concerted, well-planned occupation. This is all happening under the cover of Miyetti Allah, of which President Buhari is the patron”,* he said, referring

to an organization which claims to defend the rights of Fulani herdsmen.

High-level state involvement is one reason why the armed forces have proven unwilling to step in and control the violence. *“I don’t think the army is trying to solve anything. If anything, they would try to promote it”,* explained Mr. Viljoen, observing that despite years of violence *“not a single ulani has been pros 93100t60Anagbe, of the diocese of*

Nigerian bishop calls for end of “conspiracy of silence” on persecution of Christians

Makurdi Diocese is located in the Middle Belt, in Benue state, where “according to records from the State government, over 5,000 of our people have been killed between 2011 and June, 2022”, explains Bishop Wilfred Chikpa Anagbe.

“Figures from the Benue State government again reveal that as of June 2022, Benue State has suffered over 200 attacks with property destroyed and close to two million people displaced and living in camps across the State. Many children have had their education cut short as their parents, unable to go to their farms, cannot cater for their school needs. There is a palpable food insecurity and there is the complete loss of human dignity as men, women and children often resort to unsafe coping mechanisms for survival.”

Besides the immediate tragedy which is the loss of lives, there are the permanent scars borne by those who are left behind. Makurdi currently houses 80% of the displaced in Benue State, and despite financial difficulties, the local Church has done its best to relieve suffering and need. *“It is impossible to maintain*

one’s equilibrium after witnessing the massacre of innocent and defenseless people in the face of harsh economic conditions, notwithstanding our role as God’s ministers. The pain is much and the wounds not likely to heal any time soon.”

Bishop Wilfred rejected the idea that religion has nothing to do with the conflict, saying he believes *“the attacks, particularly in Benue State, increasingly look like a jihad against Christians”*, adding that *“Benue is targeted because the majority of its people have steadfastly declared their will not to surrender their Judeo-Christian faith, identity and cultural values to Islam”*.

Fa

3.4. Communal and ethnic clashes¹²

Area: in the North-Central Region (Hausa/Fulani) and in the Benue (Tiv/Jukun) and Enugu (Agulari/Omulai) states.

Root of the conflict: Tribal conflict with primary interest in occupying land and leadership.

As mentioned several times before, it is often difficult to understand the limits between outright persecution, historical ethnic rivalries, and simple banditry.

Many African countries have a very short history as a national unit. Furthermore, as we well know, many of the borders were drawn by European powers, without regard to ethnic families. African countries did not create their borders based on a national identity forged over the centuries. Nigeria is just 63 years old. Before it was called Nigeria, several centuries-old states and kingdoms had coexisted, each with its own allies and rivals. The rivalry between ethnic groups is still a polarizing factor in many African countries. Ethiopia and South Sudan are clear examples.

Historically, identities in Nigeria have played an important role in the political process both during the colonial period and in the post-colonial era. Many of the imbalances Nigeria suffers today date back to the colonial period, because the British allowed or even encouraged the emergence of identities as major factors in the distribution of power and sociopolitical development.

Like with many other ruling powers, divide and conquer was a factor and this has to be taken into account in the reality of the country today. Muslims against the Christians, northerners against southerners, Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo among themselves. Religious and ethnic differences became strategic factors in the merger of territories that arose during the colonial era.

3.5. Biafra separatists

Area affected: the South-East, in particular the Igbo states

Root of the conflict: political independence ambitions

The post-independence civil war, known as the Biafran War, took place between 1967 and 1970, killing over a million people, with some sources pointing to about two million, including many civilians. Barely 50 years later, south-eastern Nigeria, particularly the Igbo ethnic group who fought hardest for the independence of the Republic of Biafra, still have it very much in mind. Parents and grandparents were part of the fight for Biafra and the scars remain. For these, mostly Nigerian Christians of the Igbo ethnic group, but not exclusively, Biafra represents the aspirations of the broader south-eastern population, which feels it cannot coexist with a government dominated by the agenda and the interests of the mostly Muslim Hausa-Fulanis of Northern Nigeria. Tensions are rising in the Igbo states of Imo, Abia, Enugu, Anambra and Ebonyi States. Corruption, arbitrary violence, land rivalries, ethnic strife, religious differences and government neglect have led to a resurgence of secessionist militants demanding independence.

For the Igbo the land is sacred and the conflict with the Fulani increases the tensions. Most of the pro-Biafra groups in the southeast region are campaigning for greater autonomy by peacefully protesting against the Nigerian federal government.

However, in the context of a growing separatist movement in the region, clashes between the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) and government forces have erupted. A wave of violence hit southeast Nigeria in the first six months of 2022, with an 80% increase in incidents compared to the same period of the previous

But since the motives and claims that generated the violence have yet to be resolved, there continue to be armed gangs and militias, as well as criminals dedicated to oil theft.

The Niger Delta is a hotbed for piracy in coastal communities. But, in recent years the presence of international naval vessels and co-operation with regional authorities have had a positive impact on piracy attacks in the Gulf of Guinea, with a decrease in incidents. Still, in 2021, there are reports of 115 vessels being boarded, 11 attempted attacks, five vessels fired upon, one vessel hijacked and 57 crew kidnapped in seven separate incidents¹⁴.

“Oil exploration and exploitation in the Delta State began in 1956. That means it predates the creation of the Nigerian state. A place called Oloibri was the first place that got the crude oil. But if you go there, it’s like a ghost town. There is nothing. So much money is stolen from the Niger Delta. The Niger Delta is where crude is extracted from, and not just crude. There are many gas deposits

3.7. Cultism and ritual killings

Area affected: South-East and Southern Nigeria

Root of the conflict: economic wealth, criminality, power, superstition

3.7.1. Cultism¹⁵

Cultism refers to the phenomenon of secret societies, secret brotherhoods or secret cults that is widespread in southern Nigeria. It was born in the university environment in the 1950s, copying the tradition of American fraternities and freemasons, around the ideal of independence. In the 1980s, however, secret societies evolved into dangerous and violent criminal organisations that control organised crime, including human trafficking ne-

tworks in Nigeria and around the world. They maintain university campuses as centres of operations, but act like real mafia clans.

Membership in secret societies is prohibited by the Nigerian Constitution and hundreds of them were banned in 2004 by a law on secret cults. The three oldest were founded in the University of Ibadan, in Oyo State, where the Yoruba ethnicity is the majority. Benin, in Edo State, is now considered the capital of cultism.

Membership implies access to influence, social acceptance, power and wealth. There is an iron hierarchy typical of classic criminal organisations. The exact number of confraternities operating in Nigeria is currently unknown, but some estimates put the number at several hundred.

Initiation rituals are violent and members are often recruited through coercion and psychological manipulation. Women who are initiated are often victims of rape, and in other cases initiation rituals include the use of human blood.

Secret cults are a serious problem in universities, but similar phenomena have appeared in big cities. Since the 1980s, street gangs of young people called area boys or agberos have been involved in petty crime. Today, these gangs have formed sects that operate and act much like their counterparts on college campuses and some are used by political leaders at election time, to fight other rival groups, and to engage in criminal activities related to robbery, prostitution and kidnapping rings.

3.7.2 Ritual killings¹⁶

Ritual killings are still a common phenomenon in Nigerian life. Ritual killers search for human parts – heads, breasts, tongues and sexual organs – requested by witchdoctors, juju priests, traditional healers and occultists who use them for their sacrifices or to prepare supposedly magical potions. Ritual sacrifice was practised in primitive religious communities in Nigeria long

before the arrival of Christianity in Africa. In traditional African



4. IDPs in Nigeria

According to the UNHCR, conflicts involving Boko Haram and other armed groups, as well as clashes between herders and farmers, have displaced some three million Nigerians (2022) from their homes. North-east Nigeria, north-west Nigeria and the Middle Belt are the most affected by this tragedy.

The conflict stemming from of Boko Haram and ISWAP attacks in north-eastern Nigeria continues into its 12th year. Attacks and insecurity have displaced millions of people, devastated agricultural production and other livelihoods, cut off essential services and caused a security crisis. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, over 2.2 million people are displaced due to conflict in the three worst affected states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe. Some of the victims have been in the camps or settlements for over eight years.

The diocese of Maiduguri, the place of origin of the Islamist group Boko Haram, is the worst hit by its attacks. More than 200 churches, many parishes, 25 schools, three hospitals, three monasteries and countless shops, as well as private houses and business centres were destroyed in the diocese. Some of them have been rebuilt with the help of ACN.

Even though many refugees have returned to Borno, for example from Cameroon, hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons have not been able to return to their homes and villages, which were destroyed and are still unsafe. They are concentrated in “garrison cities” defended by the Nigerian armed forces but with a limited perimeter and from which it is risky to leave. Living conditions are difficult, congested and unsanitary. It also limits the livelihood possibilities of displaced farmers, who are unable to plant or harvest their fields.

The herdsmen's violence against farmers has created a new humanitarian crisis in the Middle Belt region over the past five years. In its report UNHCR maps over 400,000 in the Benue State. However, according to Governor Samuel Ortom of Benue State there are over two million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and 10,000 refugees from Cameroon in Benue¹⁷.

According to representatives of the diocese of Makurdi, located in Benue state, attacks by armed herdsmen (Fulani) – which take place almost weekly – have claimed many lives and properties and rendered countless people homeless, thereby forcing them to relocate the population to the 13 official Internally Displaced Person's (IDPs) camps in Benue state. Many others live with relatives in host communities and unofficial camps.

However, this tragedy is still largely ignored by the media and even by international aid agencies, much more focused on the serious situation in the northeast of the country. There are no comprehensive reports on the situation.

The local government area of Guma hosts most IDPs in Benue state. There are four camps (two in Daudu and one each in Ortese and Gbajimba) along with other hosting communities and unoffi-

cial camps. In addition, the area was badly affected by the October 2022 floods that destroyed many farms, houses and properties.

The combined effects of the attacks and displacement and the recent flood situation have worsened what were already precarious living conditions: "They are without food. They don't have a bed. People who used to fend for themselves now have to beg to eat, to feed themselves. The children in the camps are malnourished, some walk around naked. They don't even have a shirt to put on. They have not been able to go to school for many years. They cannot access medical care. They don't have water. They lack the ba-



“I don’t want there to be any night-time. I wish it was always daytime. My nights are full of fear, anxiety, nightmares”, says Naomi, a young Nigerian woman, and internal refugee. Like so many of her fellow compatriots in northeast Nigeria, Naomi relives the same nightmare every night: being abducted, the terrorists storming her town, forcing her to “marry” a Boko Haram terrorist or witnessing one of the extremist insurgents murdering someone in her family.

“I get frightened as soon as night falls”, this young woman confesses. She is just one of more than 30,000 internally displaced Nigerians in Pulka, close to the border with Cameroon and around 120 km from the city of Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State in northeast Nigeria.

Charles, a young father who is 33 and a refugee in the same place, also admits to having recurrent nightmares. *“I relive the time when we were living in hiding. Since the terrorists used to attack by night, we would get out of the town as soon as night began to fall and hide in the bush. Many nights I still dream that I’m in hiding”,* he explains ACN.

Both are now living next to the Alpha refugee camp in Pulka – just one of the 20 camps scattered across Borno State and one of six in the Gwoza district alone.

But the situation there is still very precarious. *“We were refugees in Cameroon, then we returned and have been living here for two years now, but the situation is still unsafe. We are once again living in our own country, in our own area, in our beloved Pulka, but we are living as refugees. We are nearer to our home than when we were living in Cameroon, but once again we are living in danger”,* says Charles.

“They can’t go far from the refugee camps, since their security cannot be guaranteed outside the camps. In any case, in



ACN is deeply involved in Nigeria, operating a large number of projects, which range from construction or reconstruction of infrastructure to formation and material support for priests, seminarians and other pastoral agents.

In the past five years: 2.8 million EUR were spent on construction and reconstruction and 2.5 million EUR for religious formation, most of it for priests and seminarians.

ACN also provides a platform of information about the suffering of Christians and helps local Church authorities to speak out at international events on issues such as religious freedom and Christian persecution.

For 2023 and beyond, ACN is planning an extensive program to respond to the needs of the Nigerian Church.

It will do so along 5 lines:

- 1. Keeping our Project Partners Safe**
- 2. Building Peace through interreligious dialogue and formation**
- 3. Caring for the victims of violence**
- 4. Strengthening the Church in its Outreach**
- 5. Supporting Prayer for Peace, Healing and Forgiveness**

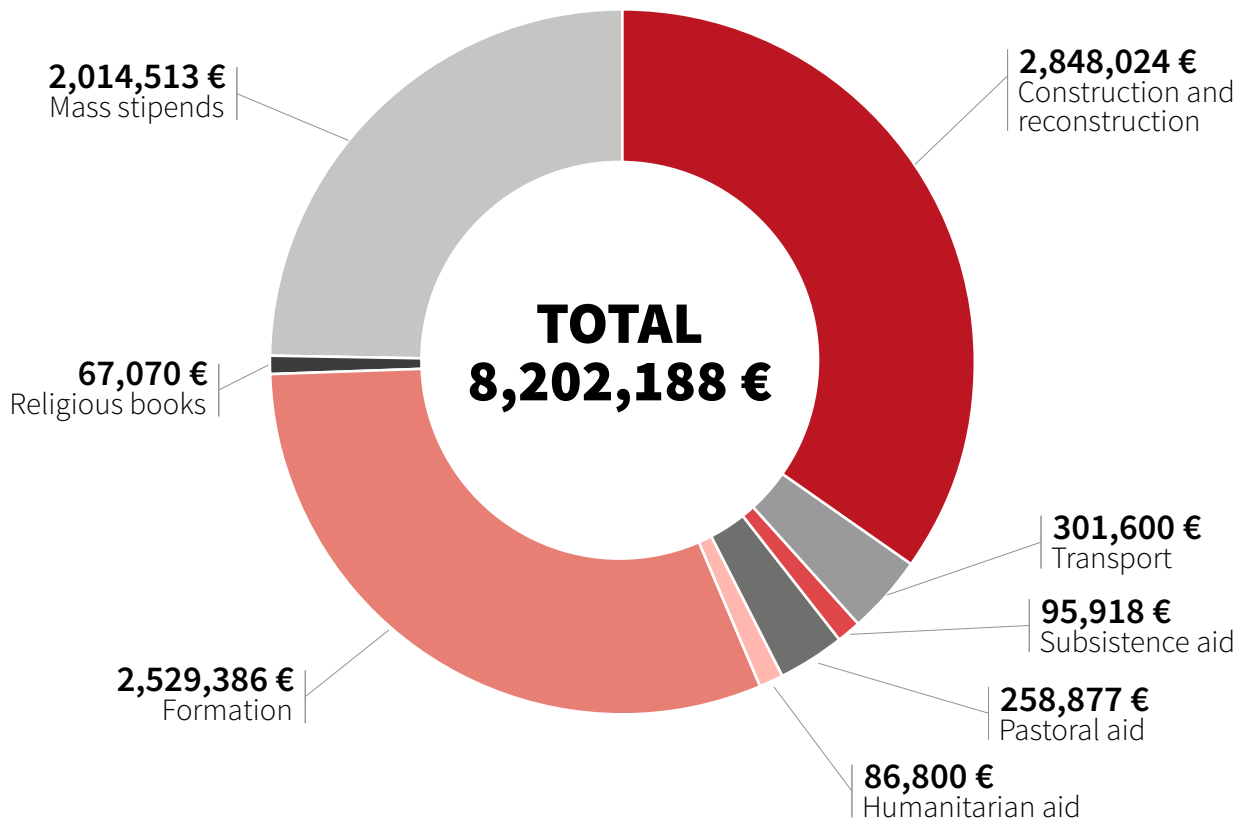
5.1. Overview of the last five years

From 2018 to 2022 (as of 28 Nov) ACN financed 637 projects in Nigeria, in different fields. During this period of time ACN's help amounted to 8.2 million euros.

ACN has supported the local Church, especially in the north of the country, which suffers from poverty and discrimination. For the past years the charity supported the reconstruction of Church properties destroyed by Islamist terrorists and trauma healing for the victims. In the south, the efforts of the pontifical foundation are focused on deepening spiritual formation through scholarships and training sessions.

ACN's Help for Nigeria by projects sector in euros

(2018 - 2022 as of 28 Nov.)



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A Trauma Centre for healing in Maiduguri - Caring for the wounded and traumatized

The threat of Boko Haram may have subsided from the Diocese of Maiduguri, and north-eastern Nigeria in general, but the horrors inflicted by the group remain in the forms of physical and mental wounds in the people who suffered.

Education is the main weapon in this new fight. “This is a priority for our diocese, especially for the refugees who have returned. We have taken it upon ourselves to make sure the children get an education, from primary school even, if possible, to university. This is key to defeating Boko Haram. When people have training to secure their livelihood, then they don’t go and kill people”, says Bishop Oliver Doeme.

Priests play a very important role in helping the local population, but the diocese is also concerned with the psychological well-being of its clergy. “One of the programs we have begun is trauma counselling for the priests. Our priests were invited to this trauma counselling and they returned very joyful and very thankful. Our female religious also went and returned strengthened.”

One of the most important areas in which the diocese invests is in promoting forgiveness, especially now that many Boko Haram members are being reintegrated into society. “On the feast of Our

Lady of Fatima, we reconsecrated our diocese to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. People feel spiritually uplifted, and encouraged, and it makes them ready to forgive. People carry grudges against Boko Haram members who killed their loved ones, but they now have the ability to forgive. They see Jesus hanging on the cross,



5.2. Examples of our help

Sturdy cars for priests ministering in an unsafe region

Pankshin is a young diocese in the central part of Plateau State, in North-Central Nigeria. Today, Pankshin diocese has 36 parishes and over 550 outstation churches. The diocese covers 8,486 square km, but due to the poor roads (less than 200 kilometers are paved) it can take up to four hours to travel from one part of the diocese to the other. The roads, mostly mountainous and rocky, are in deplorable conditions and are covered with potholes, and during the rainy season become muddy and difficult to drive on. The top average speed on the paved roads is about 50 km/h and 25 km/h on the rest of the unpaved roads that make up the vast majority in the diocese.

The security situation in the diocese is worsening, with the bishop describing it as follows: “One of our diocesan priests was kidnapped in October 2021, though he has now been freed, and the stories are devastating and worrisome. Generally, there is fear of attacks when you travel on lonely roads, especially when the vehicles used are not safe and break down. There is

now a culture of fear and discrimination in some places within the diocese. The Catholic Church, Christians of other denominations and Muslims tend to compete for followers.”

With the current waves of kidnapping and terrorist attacks, ACN is trying to do everything possible to ensure that priests and sisters in these remote areas have sturdy cars that will guarantee more safety as they travel past the bush and isolated areas of the diocese.





Addressing security challenges threatening the safety of religious sisters

In 1956 the Dominican missionary sisters were invited to build up a Christian presence in the Muslim dominated north-west of Nigeria. The sisters started to carry out the most needed work through education, healthcare, grass-roots evangelization and social work. In 1973, the sisters saw an urgent need to begin the formation of Nigerian Dominican sisters who know the language, needs and culture of the local population. This work bore fruit when in 1997 the missionary sisters decided to hand over full leadership of the Nigerian Congregation to the local sisters in Gusau.

The sisters are fostering dialogue with people of different faiths and tribes, as well as initiating and promoting ways to support and care for spiritually, morally and economically deprived youth. They build communities which encourage relationships of truth, unity and justice.

Over the past years the various conflicts in Nigeria (especially in the northern part) have escalated. The area where the convent is situated has not been spared. The sisters report cases of bandits abducting people from their homes and places of

work. The security threats have made the Dominican sisters realize the urgent need to protect the convent in order to deter bandits.

Sr Justina concludes: “We are touching many lives of both Christians and Muslims. Despite the insecurity and challenges that we face, our community life keeps us together. It has been a source of joy and strength.”

The sisters in Zuru are also worried about increased insecurity in their region.



5.2. Examples of our help

Support for Internally Displaced People in Borno and Benue state

Educating Children who fled from Boko Haram

The refugees in Pulka belong to the Mandala tribe, and, before the Boko Haram insurgency started, lived in small villages next to Pulka, 20 km from the border with Cameroon. In 2013, when Boko Haram arrived in the region, many decided to flee to the surrounding mountains. When the fighting got closer, they crossed the border with Cameroon and settled in camps in the diocese of Maroua-Mokolo where they stayed from August 2014 to May 2017. When the situation appeared to have calmed, many refugees returned from Cameroon, trying to reach their villages. This was not always possible, either for security reasons or because the villages were destroyed. Many of them decided to settle in Pulka where the Nigerian army provides security. Today, 90% of them live in the four camps near the city.

The project aims to help the diocese of Maiduguri pay school fees for 700 internally displaced children from the Pulka community: 425 girls and 275 boys.

Ensuring the Basic Needs of the IDPs Living in Guma

This project seeks to provide 2,500 IDPs in the camps in Guma Local Government Area with blankets and sleeping mats to improve their living condition. The target beneficiaries will include pregnant and nursing mothers, IDPs with disabilities, children between the ages of 3-10 and elderly men and women aged 60 and above. The beneficiaries will be profiled, selected, and shortlisted according to the aforementioned selection criteria.



Eucharistic Adoration Centre to give Hope to traumatised Christians

The diocese of Sokoto has remained at the heart of the persecutions. These have notoriously taken the shape of the burning and destruction of Churches as well as businesses and properties belonging to Christians.

Some incidents pose a very serious challenge to the faith of the people. One was the brutal murder of Michael Nnadi two years ago. The young seminarian from Sokoto had come to the Major Seminary of Kaduna to become a priest. After being kidnapped he summoned the courage to call his murderers to conversion from their evil ways, and for this he paid the ultimate price. Another testimony of faith was Mrs. Bolanle Ataga, a Catholic mother who was also violently murdered for refusing to give in to the sexual demands of the gang leaders who abducted her.

In May 2021, two priests, Msgr. Joseph Keke and Fr Alphonus Bello, were abducted from their presbytery in Malumfashi. The first was released after three weeks in captivity but Fr Alphonus was killed on the Parish premises on that same night.

The Catholic Bishop's Conference is working to possibly present these two victims as "Martyrs of Nigeria" in the near future, but meanwhile, in the Diocese of Sokoto, Bishop Kukah and the faithful he serves want to set in motion an initiative to encourage and deepen the faith of grieving Christians by

building a place where the suffering people can bring their pain, their prayers and find healing in God's merciful love: "It is truly the fulfilment of the dictum that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Christian faith".

With the help of ACN benefactors, the faithful will be able to

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