

**Call for Submissions: Report to the United Nations General Assembly
Eliminating Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief
Achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16)**

SUBMISSION ON THE RIGWE PEOPLE IN NIGERIA

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The Rigwe people (also known as Irigwe) are under attack. The past few years have seen an increase in, and more coordinated, attacks by the Fulani militants, which has resulted in the violent killing of many of her inhabitants.

The Rigwe people group have resided in Nigeria for centuries. They are predominantly Christian adherents and were the origin of Christian missions in the middle-belt and north with the arrival of missionary Roland Bingham in the late 1800's. They are believed to be a small people group with a population near 100,000. Primarily residing in Bassa Local Government of Plateau State, which is in the perilous middle-belt region of Nigeria.

I. Discrimination in Law and Practice

- ***Patterns and examples of discrimination against minority religious or belief communities, in the area of***
 - a. ***Civil and political rights, including but not limited to participation and representation in the public life, access to justice and effective remedies, liberty and security, freedom of expression, assembly and association;***

An overwhelming majority of Rigwes live in fertile area of Plateau State. When the Fulani militants attack, most of these villagers are forced to take refuge in the nearby town of Miango or in Jos city, the Plateau State capital. These displaced people make attempts to return to their homes and farms, but without income and government assistance they are often unable to travel home. In addition to killings and displacements, 23 churches, including residential homes for their Pastors, were burnt down.

b. Rights to Adequate Food and Housing

Amidst the pandemic of COVID-19 in Nigeria, there have surfaced numerous reports stating that food insecurity has worsened throughout the nation due to the massive shutdown and travel bans effecting the transportation of food and materials.

From 2017 to 2019, many Rigwe communities were attacked, abolishing over 4,000 homes, displacing over 2,200 people, and destroying over 2,600 farms. Not only did they lose their homes and the inability to farm, the Rigwe people also lost a source of food and income since their grain storage is adjacent to their home. With nowhere else to go, they are often forced to stay with relatives and friends or taken to a make-shift internally displaced people's camp. This places a strain on both the victims and their hosts as, "many families within Miango had to open their doors beyond their capacity to admit the displaced into their homes"¹.

- ***Laws and Policies restricting the right to manifest freedom of religion or belief of minority religious communities***

The Federal Republic of Nigeria is constitutionally directed to uphold the freedom of religion or belief² and to "protect, preserve and promote the Nigerian cultures which enhance human dignity"³. A multinational state, Nigeria is inhabited by more than 250 ethnic groups with over 500 distinct languages all identifying with a wide variety of cultures.

It is important to note that ethnic groups are also legally guided by Customary Courts, Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs. Various ethnic groups have their own customary laws that regulates their particular Chieftaincy issues but hierarchy is often difficult to explain and implement. For the Rigwe, however, despite making up some 100,000 citizens in Nigeria, their ethno-religious background has been a specific target of the Fulani militants.

The Nigerian House of Representatives raised the concern of genocide in July 2018. Lawmakers insisted President Buhari do more than just recite verbal condemnation of the attacks and, "take decisive and practical steps to give effect to Section 14 (2) (b) of the 1999 constitution as amended"⁴, which states, "the security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government". Hon. Idris Abdullahi Wase (Plateau APC) claimed he knew specific politicians who are sponsors of the killings, adding that he had, "documentary evidence to support his position"⁵.

According to the reports, the Fulani militants bold and unabated attacks have disrupted public order, impaired the health of the citizens and interfered with the educational system. In recent attacks, military either withdrew before the attacks or arrived after the Fulani militants fled.⁶ Despite the local villages Chief and vigilante groups reporting and raising awareness, there has

¹ Rural Youth Integral Support Initiative, from report "Rigweland Genocide Humanitarian Response Team Vol.1"

² Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, "Chapter IV: Fundamental Rights", Section 38.1 - states, "Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance", ²

<https://constituteproject.org/ontology/Nigeria?lang=en>

³ ibid

⁴ <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2018/07/04/house-designates-plateau-killings-as-genocide/>

⁵ ibid

⁶ <https://www.zenger.news/2020/04/16/9-christians-dead-in-latest-nigeria-attack-by-muslim-tribesmen/>

been little to no cooperation with authorities or security forces and no follow-up investigations or arrests.

- *Circumstances in which religious communities are prevented from administering their own affairs without State interference.*

The Rigwe community leaders have released reports that reveal the extent to which the Nigerian government is complicit or ignorant of these continued attacks by Fulani militants. The Rigwe's right to freedom and the ability to defend themselves is slowly being denied. This has increased the control by government and security forces, which is exercised through corruption and discriminatory procedures. The lack of government and security support negatively effects the livelihood of Rigwes who are denied their ability to generate income, safely attend worship services, secure living situations, pursue education, and freedom of movement.

In 2019, a phone was found by a fleeing Fulani attacker and immediately presented to the security forces. Nothing was done – no investigation and no pursuit of justice. Then, in 2020 another phone was found and the local community conducted their own investigation before submitting the phone to security. They uncovered that, “among the 26 phone numbers saved to the phone were direct mobile phone numbers for Nigeria’s army and police officers—the very people who should be hunting terrorists”⁷.

Many are afraid to criticize the government or security officials as their personal safety would be at risk, revealing their location and disagreement. In fact, there is proof that when a community voices their opposition to the government their basic services are often neglected – health, transportation, education, etc.

Several new laws in Nigeria are under consideration: “Protection from Internet Falsehoods and Manipulation and Other Related Matters Bill 2019” and the “Bill for an Act to Provide for The Prohibition of Hate Speeches and for Other Related Matters” (aka “Hate-Speech Bill”). Amnesty International correctly states, “[These] bills on hate speech and social media are dangerous attacks on freedom of expression”⁸. Adding that these bills, “give authorities arbitrary powers to shut down the internet and limit access to social media, and make criticizing the government punishable with penalties of up to three years in prison”⁹.

⁷ <https://www.zenger.news/2020/04/23/cell-phone-raises-questions-of-links-between-attackers-and-nigeria-authorities/>

⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/12/nigeria-bills-on-hate-speech-and-social-media-are-dangerous-attacks-on-freedom-of-expression/>

⁹ *ibid*

II. Effects of Discrimination

- ***Displacement and forced migration of religious or belief communities owing to discrimination, exclusion or land rights violations.***

The lack of protection of Rigwe Christians and the overwhelming hands-off sentiment of the Nigerian government has emboldened Fulani militants to continue their attacks. Rigwe Christians have revealed the numerous violations of human rights and what individuals and families have experienced: torture, physical abuse, religious persecution, political neglect, and loss of life (including the killing of pregnant women), which are among the most reprehensible crimes against humanity reported.

Now, State and Federal programs are trying to alleviate the spread of COVID-19 (which has taken the lives of 287 Nigerians), but meanwhile, Rigwe people in Plateau State continue to be slaughtered. Since 2017, over 330 people have been killed, over 4,000 homes razed and 2,600 farms destroyed in Rigwe alone.

- ***Instances of communal violence against religious minorities, and incitement to such violence, and the adequacy of state responses.***

Recent coordinated attacks, which lasted two weeks (March 30th to April 14th), led to nearly 30 deaths when Fulani militants attacked four villages. There were reports that local residents received a warning of an imminent attack and notified authorities, but the cry for help went unheeded. Then, within hours, women and children were killed and dozens of homes razed. They exerted destruction to over 75 homes, two churches, displacing hundreds of individuals.¹⁰

Prior to this catastrophe, there have been other systematic attacks, such as the destruction of 18 villages in Rigweland which lasted five weeks (September 7th to October 17th, 2017). An estimated 80 people lost their lives, over 200 farms were damaged and nearly 1,000 homes destroyed.¹¹ It was during that same period, when 29 people were lured by security forces into a vacant school only to be abandoned and slaughtered when Fulani militants arrived.¹²

An eyewitness reported that, during one incident, “security personnel were very much present on ground while these attacks took place, yet no single arrest was ever made”. Other local community leaders add that, “The entire life of Rigwe people is in total disarray; affecting economic activities, social and political lives of the people. School calendar has been affected as displaced children of attacked village areas are out of school. Schools in the affected communities are still shut.”

Locals say the Army troops are ineffective and the Police are ill-equipped to respond to calls for assistance. It is rather disturbing to know the distance from the Army Barracks (3rd Div) to these

¹⁰ <https://thewestsidegazette.com/the-government-is-silent-muslim-tribesmen-kill-christian-pastor-and-burn-down-school-in-nigerian-village/>

¹¹ Rural Youth Integral Support Initiative, from report titled “Irigweland Genocide Humanitarian Response Team”

¹² <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2017/10/uniform-men-lured-us-killed-herdsmen-plateau-attack-survivor/>

Rigwe villages is not more than 35-40 km. Albeit majority are on dirt roads, but locals insist the longest it should take is an hour.

- ***Disaggregated data showing the impact of instances of conflict and communal violence on religious communities and minorities.***

While there have been historical clashes for over twenty years, the recent five years have seen a significant increase in incidents and deaths. Between 2000 and 2015, there were a total number of 19 incidents that impacted 15 communities; resulting in 66 deaths, 26 injuries, which destroyed 306 residences and two farms.

STATS¹³

- 4,414 residential buildings demolished
- 2,890 farms destroyed ranging from 0.25 to 7 hectares.
- Two communities have been taken over and settled by the Fulani and their herds.
Location: Ritivo and Aeseh.
- 28% of effected communities have not returned or resettled

Incidents: Yearly Totals and Percentages						Remarks
Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	Totals	
INCIDENTS	4	111	139	85	339	Between 2016 and 2019 there were a total of 339 incidents which led to loss of lives, injuries, residential buildings burnt and farms destroyed
DEATHS	50	155	208	82	495	2018 had the highest total incidents of 139, accounting for 42%.

CONCLUSION

Local, State and Federal government response has been shameful and the military continues to be negligent in their handling of the situation. This slaughter must be stopped. There are remaining concerns regarding the complicity of certain elements of the armed forces in the Fulani militant violence. The impact of these ongoing, strategically coordinated attacks is devastating and the anxiety of the Rigwe is overwhelming as they grasp if these attacks aim to dislodge them from their land or total annihilation.

¹³ Rural Youth Integral Support Initiative, Impact Assessment of Fulani Herdsmen Attacks On Irigwe People 2000-19