

Genocide, International Law, and the Nigerian Conflict: A Contextual Examination

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ABSTRACT : Genocide remains one of the most severe crimes under international law due to its deliberate and systematic attempt to destroy protected groups. Rooted in the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the concept continues to frame global legal and humanitarian interventions. This paper examines the significance of genocide within international law and evaluates its applicability to the complex and evolving Nigerian conflict. Although violence in Nigeria—particularly in the Northern and Middle Belt regions—has often been interpreted as Muslim attacks on Christian communities, a closer analysis reveals political, economic, territorial, and ideological drivers that complicate the classification of the conflict as genocide. By situating Nigeria's situation within the legal framework of the Genocide Convention, this study highlights the importance of intent, group targeting, and evidentiary standards in genocide assessment. The paper concludes that, although mass atrocities and systematic violence are evident, the Nigerian crisis does not neatly fit the strict legal definition of genocide, necessitating a more nuanced approach to conflict interpretation and policy response.

KEYWORDS: *Christians, genocide, Jihadists, Nigeria, Muslims*

I. INTRODUCTION

Genocide refers to the intentional and systematic destruction of a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group (Lemkin, 1944). The term, coined by Raphael Lemkin during World War II, has since shaped global understanding of mass atrocities. The United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) defines genocide as acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a protected group, including killing, causing serious harm, imposing destructive conditions, preventing births, and forcibly transferring children (United Nations, 1948).

Genocide is thus a complex phenomenon involving coordination, targeted violence, and coercive strategies. Historical cases include the Holocaust, the Armenian Genocide, the Rwandan Genocide, and the atrocities against the Rohingya people (Power, 2002; Straus, 2016). These examples demonstrate the catastrophic consequences of genocidal intentions and underscore why genocide is treated as one of the most serious crimes under international law.

Understanding genocide and its significance in legal frameworks is essential for evaluating global responses to mass killings and group-targeted violence. If genocide were overlooked or trivialized, global stability and human rights protections would erode. International law therefore treats genocide as a central crime requiring prevention, punishment, and deterrence.

The Significance of Genocide in International Law

Genocide as an International Crime

Genocide is classified as a *jus cogens* crime—one prohibited under all circumstances—punishable by international tribunals such as the International Criminal Court (Schabas, 2009).

Protection of Human Rights

The prohibition of genocide reinforces fundamental rights, particularly the right to life and the right of groups to exist (Robertson, 2012).

Prevention and Punishment

States are obligated to prevent genocide and punish perpetrators, reflecting the principle of responsibility to protect (R2P) (Bellamy, 2015).

Universal Jurisdiction

Genocide may be prosecuted anywhere, demonstrating its universal illegality (Cassese, 2003).

Normative Framework

The Genocide Convention provides the foundational legal and moral framework for addressing mass atrocities, shaping international responses and interventions (Totten & Bartrop, 2009).

Background to the Nigerian Conflict and Its Relevance to Genocide

Nigeria's socio-political and religious conflicts have deep historical roots. The 1966 pogroms following political assassinations resulted in targeted killings of Southerners, particularly Igbo civilians (Falola, 1998). This period marked the emergence of retaliatory mass violence motivated by political, ethnic, and religious tensions.

The rise of groups such as the Maitasine movement in the 1980s introduced extremist religious violence, which later evolved into more sophisticated insurgent groups including Boko Haram and ISWAP (Pham, 2012). These groups have carried out widespread attacks, kidnappings, and massacres, often controlling territories and conducting parallel governance (Zenn, 2019).

Although attackers are predominantly Muslim, the violence has affected both Christians and Muslims, complicating simplistic narratives that frame the conflict exclusively as religiously motivated (Higazi, 2013). Many attacks occur in regions with mineral resources, fertile land, or strategic importance, indicating strong economic and territorial motivations (International Crisis Group, 2020).

The Nigerian case raises key legal questions:

- Are Christians targeted *as a religious group*?
- Are the attacks driven primarily by economic, political, or territorial interests?
- Is there evidence of genocidal intent, as required by the UN convention?

These questions must be addressed before applying the genocide label.

II. THE NIGERIAN CONFLICT: CONTEXT AND DYNAMICS

Before it can be concluded that the conflicts in Nigeria are genocidal, the intent of the attackers must be ascertained. As earlier discussed in this work, it is doubtful if the intentions of the attackers are completely religious and extermination of the Christian victims. Their pattern of attacks reflects a mission which is more political, economic and territorial. Therefore, although there had been mass killing of Christians, yet it cannot be out rightly judged to be a deliberate genocide. It may be best described as carnage. It is definitely easy for outsiders to conclude that it is genocide, having been deprived of the details and the overall content of the massacre.

Also, there have been same level of massacre in the core northern part of Nigeria, where Muslims-on-Muslims attacks had been frequently executed. This goes to show that, the intent of the bandits and fundamentalists may not primarily be to carry out genocide on Christians. As far as the insurgents are concerned, whoever constitutes, an obstruction to the advancement of their fundamentalist struggles, and whatever, will supply them food, funds, and political influence, discovered in wherever geographical location becomes an attraction to their agenda of prosecution.

To the insurgents, there is nothing stopping them from achieving the brutal expansionist programme. Therefore, it may be difficult, going by their intent and purposes to summarily conclude on Muslim genocide against Christians in Nigeria. Those ardent champions of that, are most likely being economical with their intention, which is political. As regrettable as the mass killing in Nigeria is, caution must be exercised in jumping into a wrong conclusion, largely based on presumptuous experience.

Immediately after this, a list of Muslim-on-Muslim attacks and killings has been published as well as the list of Muslim attacks on Christians in Northern and Middle Belt regions of Nigeria. A close study reveals a confusing and dilemmatic revelation about this attacks. The impression is that, there had also been Muslim on Muslim attacks and killing in those regions of the country, although it can be argued that, the attacks have been more intensified against the Christian dominated Middle Belt of Plateau, and Benue States.

Tabular Summary of some of the major documented attacks (or clashes) from roughly 2000–2025 in which Muslims (including militants, herdsmen, or rioters) attacked Christian communities in northern / central Nigeria.

Date	Location	Description of Attack	Approx. Christian Casualties / Impact	Notes / Sources
Feb–May 2000	Kaduna, Kaduna State	Riots triggered by protests over the introduction of Sharia law; Muslim youths clashed with	Estimates vary widely; a judicial commission reported 1,295 deaths; HRW estimates between 2,000 – 5,000 total	Known as the “Sharia 1” and “Sharia 2” phases of the Kaduna riots. Wikipedia

Date	Location	Description of Attack	Approx. Christian Casualties / Impact	Notes / Sources
		Christian protesters.	fatalities. Wikipedia +1	
September 2001	Jos, Plateau State	Inter-communal / religious violence over political appointments; Christians and Muslims both involved.	~1,000 deaths reported. Human Rights Watch +2 The New Humanitarian +2	According to HRW, both Christians and Muslims were perpetrators and victims. Human Rights Watch
November 2002	Kaduna, Kaduna State	Riots “sparked by” a newspaper blasphemy issue; Muslim youths attacked Christians and church properties.	At least 100 people killed; many churches burned. CSW	The violence was partly framed around a blasphemy controversy in the media. CSW
24 February 2004	Yelwa, Plateau State	A major massacre: armed attackers (described as Muslims) surrounded a church compound during worship.	~78 Christians killed, including ~48 inside a church. Human Rights Watch	Some attackers wore military-style uniforms, ambiguous identity; debate over who started the violence. Human Rights Watch
May 2–3, 2004	Yelwa, Plateau State	Counter-attack / reprisal by mostly Christian groups after February massacre.	~700 people killed (mostly Muslims, according to some sources). Wikipedia	Demonstrates the cycle of violence and reprisals. Human Rights Watch
After May 2004 (Kano)	Kano, Kano State	Retaliatory attacks by Muslims in Kano following Yelwa massacres.	~200+ people killed. Human Rights Watch +1	Reported to be revenge for what happened in Plateau State. Human Rights Watch
Nov 2008	Jos, Plateau State	Electoral violence / religious-ethnic violence. Christian-Muslim gangs clashed.	Reports say 200+ killed in two days. Human Rights Watch +2 The New Humanitarian +2	According to The Guardian: “Hundreds dead ... in central Nigeria” Human Rights Watch
Jan 28, 2014	Unknown (northern Nigeria)	Church attack by gunmen (suspected Boko Haram).	99 worshippers killed (by some reports).	Reported by Al-Jazeera.
May–June 2014	Gwoza, Borno State	Boko Haram church attacks, burning churches.	~48 killed; 6 churches burned (according to persecution reporting).	These were part of larger jihadist operations in the northeast.
June 2012	Kaduna, Kaduna State	Bombings of Christian churches.	Multiple killed / injured (exact Christian death tolls vary). Human Rights Watch	Known as the June 2012 Kaduna church bombings. Human Rights Watch
2016–2019	Benue,	Fulani herdsmen	Numerous but scattered; precise	These are part of ongoing

Date	Location	Description of Attack	Approx. Christian Casualties / Impact	Notes / Sources
(various)	Plateau, other states	attacks on Christian farming communities.	Christian death figures are disputed and less systematically recorded in some sources.	farmer-herder conflicts; some are framed in religious terms, but economic and ethnic dimensions are also very strong.
13–14 June 2025	Yelwata, Benue State	Massacre of Christian internally displaced persons (IDPs) at a Catholic mission settlement.	/ Estimated 100–200 killed; ~3,000 displaced. Wikipedia	Reported by multiple media sources; ethnic-herder conflict likely mixed with religious motivation.

III. HUMANITARIAN IMPACT

In the Northern parts of the Nigeria, the conflict has produced severe humanitarian consequences, which include mass displacement, widespread casualties, and psychological trauma (Amnesty International, 2020). While some international actors, including the incumbent U.S. President, Donald Trump, have framed the situation as a genocide against Christians, such interpretations risk oversimplifying a multi-layered conflict (Campbell, 2021). A deeper study shows that, many attackers may actually not intend to annihilate their victims, while motives often extend beyond religion, and could include resource extraction, territorial expansion, political manipulation, and organized criminality (Botha & Abdile, 2014). These factors complicate genocide analysis under the strict legal definition, which requires specific intent to destroy a protected group.

IV. CONCLUSION

Nothing can be more truthful than saying, there are massacres of Christians in the Central North of Plateau, Benue, Kaduna and Nassarawa States, but, it will be far from the truth to say that, such massacres are purely planned and executed with the sole intent to exterminate the affected Christian areas. Rather, it appears to be part of a broader expansionist game, which will allow the pastoralist Fulani who had been migrating from West, Central and North African countries, to access very convenient geographical spaces for settlement. Basically, the scale and execution of the plan seem to scare the present occupants of those land mass away, with their constant attacks. Unfortunately, this initial plan has been hijacked by the more economically motivated political sponsors of the agenda, therefore, turning it to commercial ventures and source of income. Some of these fundamentalists groups had pledged alliances to ISIS and Al-Shabab, and other notable international terrorist groups. Having said that, it may be said that, the recent threat by President Donald Trump of America to order his country's troops to invade Nigeria and kill the extremists may be misplaced, having no roots in truth and in reality of what is happening in Nigeria. President Donald Trump failed to understand the complexities in Nigeria, putting in context, the history, the demography and the various players within and without the shores of Nigeria. This should be expected, because it is a known fact that, Nigeria means different things to different people and nations. To that extent, even the intent of President Donald Trump too, cannot be ascertained in all of this brouhaha.

Observations

- the current insecurity in Nigeria is wrapped in multilayered economic, political and expansionist agenda garments
- the authorities: political and military, appear nonchalant to ending insurgency in Nigeria
- Nigeria is probably not experiencing genocide in the strict sense of it
- intent of the attackers has not fully demonstrated and confirmed annihilation of a group of people. Especially Christians
- insurgents themselves appear to be confused and disorientated about their insurgency's mission and agenda
- insurgency and banditry in Nigeria appear to be run and financed by prominent citizens of Nigeria
- all intentions appear predominantly linked to politics, economic, and territorial expansion, and less on religious hatred
- there have been similar attacks, with same ferocities in both exclusively dominated Muslim and Christian areas of Nigeria

- the sincerity of the stakeholders is doubted as things are unfolding in Nigeria
- Nigeria is most probably experiencing the worst form of insecurity from insurgents and bandits, as citizens could no longer feel free to move around the country.

Recommendations

- genuine efforts should be made to end the current killings in Nigeria
- with the right assistance, devoid of politicking, the attacks can be stopped
- all stakeholders should stop playing lip service to insecurity challenges in Nigeria
- the US President should assist Nigeria procure the right military equipment for the Nigeria army
- the Nigeria army should fish out the internal collaborators of the Insurgents among them
- to improve the living standard of the average Nigerians, and restore sanity to the geographical location, insurgency and banditry must be stop by all means legally possible.

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