



A background to the Islamic Movement of Nigeria

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Presented at WOCMES, 17 July 2018

World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies Seville, July 16th – 20th 2018

Congrès Mondial des Études sur le Moyen-Orient et l’Afrique du Nord Seville, du 16 au 20 Juillet
2018

PANEL: 'Sectarianism Driven by Political Interests: The Case of Nigeria and Islamic Movement of Nigeria'

The Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) is an independent, non-profit, campaigns, research and advocacy organisation based in London, UK. Since its establishment in 1997, the IHRC has developed relations with a wide range of different organisations around the world in order to campaign for justice for all peoples, regardless of their racial, confessional or political background.

IHRC has at the core of its mandate the investigation of human rights abuses and referral of cases to all the relevant international bodies, such as the International Criminal Court in The Hague. The legal team has received reports of human rights abuses from a variety of sources in Nigeria and internationally, including NGOs and victims’ families. This material has been analysed and is now being provided to the ICC Prosecutor.

Nigeria is a federation comprising 36 States and 774 local government areas, with a population of approximately 168 million inhabitants belonging to over 250 ethnic groups. The three largest groups are:

- the Hausa-Fulani Muslims living predominantly in the north;
- the Yoruba, followers of both Christian and Islamic faiths, residing mainly in the south-west; and the Igbo, most of whom are Christians, who are found primarily in the south-east.

Ethnic and religious identities often overlap and correlate with the pattern of political parties as well as with voting behaviour. Causes and types of violence in Nigeria are multiple and differ from state to state. The parts of Nigeria most affected by violence at different times in the past include:

the Middle-Belt states in central Nigeria; the Niger Delta; and Northern states, particularly Borno, Kano, Yobe, Kaduna and Adamawa states, affected by communal and post-election violence. Violence occurred in particular in the northern region around the 2011 elections, during which hundreds of civilians were allegedly killed.

Following the massive attacks on civilians in the period between July 2002 and April 2011 in the context of 'inter-communal, sectarian and political violence, resulting in the deaths of thousands of people, the ICC Prosecutor's office initiated a preliminary investigation into the incidents as crimes against humanity, which is currently at phase 3 (admissibility).

The Islamic Movement of Nigeria is the main target of such violent attacks by the Nigerian army and Boko Haram, especially during their annual al-Quds processions, allegedly justified by sectarian-motivated grounds. On the contrary, the Islamic Movement of Nigeria is a broad-based grass-roots organisation based in Zaria, the major city of Kaduna State, starting in the late 1970s as a student movement. Since its establishment, it has grown into a social and religious movement with supporters from all religious affiliations and today estimates say the Islamic Movement of Nigeria enjoys the support of between 10-15 million people across Nigeria, from both Sunni and Shia Islamic schools of thought as well as many Christians. Most spiritual activities are conducted in the Hussainiyyah in Zaria.

Nevertheless, the Nigerian security outfits have regularly perpetrated bloody attacks, especially the clampdown on members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria and destruction of Islamic Movement of Nigeria headquarters in Sokoto in July 2007, in Zaria in 2009, 2014 and 2015. The latter was the most devastating attacks launched against the movement, resulting in more than 1000 people being killed and many hundreds injured. In addition to those, cases of extrajudicial killings, rape, genital mutilation and sexual assault, torture and mass graves have also been evidenced in the emerging reports. Since the 2015 attacks, Islamic Movement of Nigeria leader Shaykh Zakzaky has been illegally detained in prison in extremely poor health conditions.

As for the events in 2014, IHRC sent a fact-finding mission to Zaria on 30 July 2014. IHRC Chair, Massoud Shadjareh, led the mission and a report was compiled afterwards, based on direct interviews with victims, their families, and also eyewitnesses. The findings include video footage of Nigerian soldiers firing on unarmed civilians located at the tail end of the al-Quds procession in Zaria on 25 July.

In that time, the attacks happened in two occasions. On 25th July, a procession was viciously attacked by soldiers, who started shooting at the crowd from a very close distance (approximately 3-10 metres). All those who were interviewed by IHRC, including victims and bystanders, stated that the crowd was unarmed and did not fight back. IHRC reported that the following day a further incident occurred at the Hussainiyyah, where many of the injured had been taken in order to receive first aid after the previous day's events.

The two attacks resulted in the murder of at least 34 Islamic Movement of Nigeria members, some of whom were tortured after their arrest by the army, including three biological children of Islamic Movement of Nigeria leader Sayyid Ibrahim Zakzaky. There is also evidence that a number of those arrested died in military custody. The report indicates that some people were taken into detention alive and later emerged dead with their bodies bearing signs of torture. Others who were injured were detained for hours and brutalised before being allowed to seek medical treatment.

The incident was widely condemned with a promise by the national government to look into the matter to identify those responsible. Since then, the government has taken no action even after the Islamic Movement sent a petition to the National Human Rights Commission seeking redress.

The following year, the Nigerian army carried out massive attacks over the course of the 12th and 13th December 2015 which targeted the movement in Zaria. The operation resulted in the deaths of at least 1000 unarmed civilians, mostly Islamic Movement of Nigeria members, killed by gunshots attributed to soldiers. Hundreds more were injured.

I don't want to go head into details on the attacks of 2015, as this is what the IHRC Head of Advocacy Abed Choudhury will speak, but so far it is very important to state that, against this backdrop, IHRC believes that such massive acts of violence were carried out in the context of a widespread and systematic attack against the Nigerian civilian population, with a history of premeditation. There is also sufficient evidence to suggest an official plan by Nigerian government officials to cover up these crimes and indeed perpetuate the same.

Furthermore, IHRC is of the view that there are reasonable grounds to believe these crimes fall within the jurisdiction of the court in accordance with the article 7 of the the Rome Statute, amounting to crimes against humanity, namely the attack directed against any civilian population, and meet all the legal requirements to warrant a preliminary investigation by the ICC prosecutor.

Lastly, IHRC intends to express its growing concerns about the consequence of this savage attack on the Nigerian civilian population. Through this attack, the Nigerian people's political aspirations have been silenced, as well as their right to freedom of expression.