



## Committee on International Justice and Peace

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June 24, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken  
Secretary of State  
United States Department of State  
2100 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

As Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace I wrote you on March 19, 2021 in support of a statement by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (issued on February 23, 2021). My letter emphasized that the statement was a turning point because the bishops argued that the country was on the verge of collapse due to the government's inability or unwillingness to uphold their constitutional responsibility to protect the Nigerian citizenry.

I write now due to further worrisome developments. The Nigerian government has strongly and publicly criticized the Church statement and other religious leaders' pronouncements claiming such proclamations represent ploys to remove President Buhari from power. The Church has responded to the government's claims and I attach the statement of the Catholic Bishops' Conference President for your consideration.

The Government of Nigeria has intensified its crackdown on loyal dissent, closing down all Twitter accounts. On May 28 and 29, 128 civil society organizations marched in Abuja to mark a National Day of Mourning for the thousands of people who have died from the violence. The National Association of Catholic Lawyers issued a statement in May (attached herewith) that deplores the rising tide of violence across the nation and critiques the government for its posture of unconcern.

Continuing our Committee's call to seek peaceful means to promote greater security and reform the government of Nigeria, we urge you to work with the Nigerian Catholic Bishops' Commission on Church and Society and the National Association of Catholic Lawyers to promote interfaith dialogue and support the local Church's efforts towards these ends.

Nigeria's general elections in 2023 are on the horizon, we must not turn a blind eye to the rapidly developing crisis, or blithely hope that Nigeria will "muddle through" as expressed by Ambassador John Campbell in a recent June article in Foreign Affairs. There is a real fear that these elections will aggravate the deep divides that exist in the country and hasten its collapse and risk enveloping the wider region. Our committee staff are prepared to engage and work with State Department and USAID officials towards these ends. We urge you to pursue this opportunity for the good of the people of Nigeria.

Sincerely yours,

Most Reverend David J. Malloy  
Bishop of Rockford  
Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace

Enclosure: Archbishop Akubeze Statement of May 5, 2021, Statement of the National Association of Catholic Lawyers

**TO: THE GOVERNMENT AND PEOPLE OF NIGERIA**

**URGENT CALL TO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO BE OPEN  
TO CRITICISM IN ADDRESSING THE PERVADING INSECURITY  
IN NIGERIA**

On behalf of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, I greet all Nigerians at home and in the diaspora. Thank you all for your patience regarding the expectations of rapid development promised by various democratic governments. Since we returned to democratic rule on 29 May 1999 after several failed military dictatorship, many Nigerians who experienced the brutality of the military are aware that a return to such days is not the prayer or desire of Nigerians.

The Catholic Church in Nigeria, through the leadership of the CBCN, has spoken several times about the need for us to ensure that our democracy works for every Nigerian and not for only a few privileged politicians or those connected to them. We have, like other Nigerians, seen broken promises made by political leaders. The members of the CBCN, like other religious leaders, have spoken against what we considered Government failure concerning the constitutional obligation to protect the lives and properties of Nigerians; to work for the welfare of everyone, to protect freedom of religious expression; to protect everyone against discrimination on ethnic or religious grounds or any other forms of discrimination. All these are entrenched in the Nigerian Constitution. Every Nigerian is a stakeholder in the affairs of the country. Every Nigerian has the right to express themselves in a manner that does not incite people to violence or chaos whenever they perceive that the elected Government is failing. A Nigerian does not need to be a registered political party card-carrying member before speaking about

the failing economy, the daily killings and kidnappings of students, older men and women; babies and infants; people being killed in IDP camps and even in their homes by insurgents. Every reasonable Nigerian is sick to the stomach to read or hear of a Governor running from insurgents who want to kill him in the State where he is constitutionally the chief security officer. Nigerians are tired of hearing of bandits taking youths in the University and executing some of them, while others are kept to be used to bargain for ransom. The insecurity is leading to a daily loss of lives and properties in every part of the country. These facts are indisputable. A country where students are no longer safe in schools nor farmers safe in their farms does not have a future to look to.

In the midst of all these, the Presidency recently stated that some religious leaders and some Nigerian politicians are plotting to destabilise the country. The spokesperson for the Nigeria Army noted that there is no plan by the military to take over democratically elected persons. While we reject any call for the destabilisation of Nigeria or military takeover, we nonetheless say to the Federal Government of Nigeria, led by President Muhammadu Buhari, there is no need to focus your energy, time and resources in any form of propaganda against religious leaders who disagree with your performance. There is no need to spend so much of your time trying to blackmail anyone who criticises your Government. We speak out because we do not want Nigeria to collapse. We are not speaking out for the APC Government to fail. We are speaking out so that Nigeria will not fail. APC is not the owner of Nigeria; Nigeria is owned by Nigerians irrespective of political affiliation. APC Government must learn to listen to every Nigerian, both political actors in other parties and non-political actors in Nigeria and the diaspora. It is not out of place to call for a security summit in whatever form it may take as long

as it leads to the unity, peace, justice, progress and protection of Nigerians. The Federal Government must be transparent with every Nigerian in the struggle to revive our economy, industrialise the nation, objectively deal with corruption and significantly reduce the high level of insecurity and unemployment.

In every democracy, the welfare of the citizens is of great concern to the President. From time to time, Presidents address the people and give an account of the state of affairs in the country. Presidents of countries grant interviews to the media who are the watchdogs of democracy. But in Nigeria, we hardly hear directly from our President. Most of the time, we hear from “the Presidency.” Nigerians did not elect presidential media spokespersons. Nigerians do want to hear directly from their President and hear words that are matched with actions.

To every religious leader, let us not use inflammatory words that distort the real message we are sending to this Government. We must be united in the fight for our common destiny as a people. It must be clearly stated to the Federal Government that if they continue to ignore the constructive criticisms and recommendations of Nigerians from every sector, the country will collapse and become ungovernable. We are speedily getting there. Police stations are being burnt, our gallant military men and women are being killed, barracks are attacked, IDP camps are attacked, farmlands are invaded, youth unemployment is at its highest, private sectors are not giving enabling environment to thrive, and appointments to offices are not reflective of our diversities; the complaints are almost endless – could the sounds signalling a collapsing nation be louder than this?

In Nigeria, the Catholic Church wants the Federal Government to call for a meeting of all stakeholders to have a sincere discussion on the way forward. Such discussions must seek how to implement the much talked about restructuring and devolution of power down to the local government level.

Let us continue to pray to God to grant the Federal Government and other State actors the wisdom and courage to bring peace and justice to every Nigerian. No Government leader should watch the breakdown of law and order in Nigeria. It is our collective obligation to make Nigeria successful. As religious people, we entrust Nigeria to the hands of God and pray that we may respond to the voice of God calling us out of this crisis.

May God bless Nigeria and keep her safe. Amen.

Sincerely yours in Christ,



**+Augustine O. Akubeze**  
**Archbishop of Benin City**  
**President, Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria**

**May 6, 2021**

STATEMENT ON THE STATE OF THE NATION RELEASED BY THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC LAWYERS, NACL, THIS 16TH DAY OF MAY, 2021

COMMENCEMENT:

We, members of the National Association of Catholic Lawyers (NACL) during our Executive Meeting on the 14th of May, 2021 deliberated, among other issues, on the State of the Nation, and view with great concern and apprehension, the rapidly deteriorating security situation and level of poor governance in our country Nigeria. This is characterised by insurgency in the North-East region of the country, relentless acts of brigandage and banditry in other parts of the country, attacks on farming communities by persons suspected to be herdsmen, rustling of cattle and other livestock, kidnap for ransom and killing of innocent persons including students, clerics and law enforcement officers, bombing of police stations and other law enforcement offices, including the Correctional Centre in Owerri, Imo State, and sundry security breaches of diverse and increasingly destructive kind across the country.

Cost of governance is on the increase with low level of productivity. Public servants have resorted to heavy extortion before doing their jobs adding to dwindling income in the polity. In addition, the poor health care has led to the death of many Nigerians, young and old.

The frustrations within the system and an apparent laissez faire and seeming unconcerned posture of the country's leadership has led to calls from some quarters for the President to resign or be impeached. These calls arise from genuine concerns of Nigerians.

Having prayerfully reflected on this deplorable state of the Nigerian nation, and the extent to which it could conceivably degenerate if the situation remains unchecked, we hereby issue this statement:

Our hearts are with all Nigerians, especially families and victims of various acts of criminality and deaths resulting from poor healthcare, and we pray fervently to God the father of all mankind, to console them, to look with favour on them and grant them the fortitude to bear their irreparable losses.

We condemn in the strongest terms ever the unbridled acts of criminal elements operating almost without hindrance, and we call on the Nigeria Police Force, the Armed Forces and other law enforcement agencies, to redouble their efforts towards the fulfillment of their constitutional responsibility for the security of lives and property of the average Nigerian.

We restate, for the avoidance of any doubt whatsoever, the provisions of S. 14 (2) (b) Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, as amended, which states as follows: "the security and welfare of the people SHALL BE the primary purpose of government"

Specifically with regards to intermittent attacks on farming communities by persons suspected to be herdsmen, we fully associate ourselves with the recent call by the Southern States' Governors to the effect that "development and population growth has put pressure on available land and increased the prospects of conflict between migrating herdsmen and local populations in the South. Given this scenario, it becomes imperative to enforce the ban on Open Grazing in the South (including "(cattle

movement to the South by foot)” We further call on the Northern Governors to heed the advice of the Kano and Benue States” Governors to ban open grazing, save the farmers from agony and the Nation from the consequent high prices of food.

We call on the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federation, His Excellency President Muhammadu Buhari to, as a matter of urgency, **convene an International Security Summit that will exhaustively deliberate on the current security situation**, enable us learn lessons from countries that experienced similar situations in the past and have overcome same and, most importantly, avail us the opportunity as a country and as a people, to take advantage of State of the Art technological equipment for security surveillance and action.

Our country Nigeria remains a Federation founded on democratic principles as enshrined in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, as amended. Consequently, we remain committed to the ideals of “an indivisible and indissoluble sovereign nation under God”.

Nevertheless, we are not completely unmindful of the unbridled right of any person, or group of persons, to Freedom of Association as enshrined in the Constitution, and more particularly, Article 20 (1) of the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (Ratification and Enforcement) Act CAP 10 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, to wit:

“All People shall have a right to existence. They shall have the unquestionable and inalienable right to Self-Determination”. We therefore, endorse and embrace in its entirety the Statement by the President, Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) to the effect that “every Nigerian is a stakeholder in the affairs of the country. Every Nigerian has the right to express themselves in a manner that does not incite people to violence or chaos whenever they perceive that the elected Government is failing”.

We, therefore, call on relevant authorities, to respect at all times, and in all circumstances, the unfettered and constitutionally fundamental freedoms available to all law-abiding Nigerians who conduct themselves within the confines of the Constitution and other relevant legislation. We condemn in strong terms the recent reprisal attack on communities in Konshisha Local Government Area of Benue State by officers and men of the Nigeria Army and call on the Government of Benue State to immediately set up a Judicial Commission of Inquiry to ascertain the immediate and remote causes of the circumstances leading to this attack, ascertain the number of lives lost, the extent of damage caused to property, and persons culpable in anyway, with a view to meting out appropriate and deserving sanctions.

We restate our commitment to the constitutionally guaranteed Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion, and we call on the political class and other persons of influence, to refrain from dubious utilisation of religion as an effective tool to inflame passion, cause disaffection and ill-will amongst Nigerians, further dividing us along ethnic and religious lines. We remain committed to the ideals of inter-religious dialogue, mutual respect for diversity and harmonious relationship with persons of other faith and civilisation, and will continue to do all that we can to sustain this.

As Catholics, and as Lawyers, we are conscious of the right of workers to associate freely as expressly contained in the Papal Encyclical issued by Pope Leo XIII- Rerum Novarum (Rights and Duties of Capital and Labour) on May 15, 1891, and do hereby restate our solidarity with members

of the Judiciary Staff Association of Nigeria (JUSUN) currently on an industrial action to press for Autonomy and Independence of the Judicial Branch of Government at all levels.

We find it completely unacceptable that the activities of an entire Branch of Government, in this case the branch that holds the last hope of the Common Man, will be shut down for such an extended period of time. Consequently, we call on the National Assembly, the Executive Branch of Government and the Nigeria Governors Forum to immediately accede to the legitimate demands of JUSUN and allow for the resumption of full operations of courts at all levels.

We further call on the Executive to be more pro-active and take governance seriously. The President should address Nigerians more often especially as we move through greater challenges and where he has challenges in the delivery of the fruits of Governance should consider stepping aside.

#### CONCLUSION:

The deplorable security situation in our country Nigeria is no doubt disturbing and often overwhelming, but as a faith community we remain unshakeable in our belief that our Nation Nigeria will triumph over these challenges of development, and rightly reposition herself on the path to becoming “one nation bound in freedom, peace and unity”. We rely on the old saying of Cicero’s De Legibus „Salus Populi Suprema Lex Esto!“ (The safety/welfare of the people is the Supreme Law).

Barr. Chukwuma Ezeala

Barr. Angela Odunukwe

President

Secretary General