

Cross Party Group on Freedom of Religion and Belief

Minutes of meeting 31st May 2023, 6-7.30pm

Scottish Parliament Building

In attendance:

John Mason MSP

John Pontifex, Aid to the Church in Need

Frances Hume, Interfaith Scotland

Oliver Lane, Family Federation for world peace

Stephen Kerr MSP

Murdo Fraser MSP

Lorraine McMahon, Aid to the Church in Need

Sally Foster-Fulton, Moderator of the Church of Scotland

James Fraser, Release International

Chris Ringland, Evangelical Alliance

Apologies:

Maureen Sier, Interfaith Scotland

Jamie Spurway, Interfaith Scotland

Alan Meldrum, Open Doors

Jeremy Balfour MSP

Michael Veitch, CARE

Approval of Minutes of last meeting

The meeting started with the approval of the minutes of the previous meeting. These were approved by Murdo Fraser MSP.

Keynote Address

The keynote address was given by John Pontifex representing the organisation Aid to the Church in Need and the topic was Defending Religious Liberty in Nigeria. John's role in public affairs is to meet the survivors of persecution in their countries and to listen to their accounts of persecution.

John gave a report on Christians who are oppressed in Nigeria. He shared that Nigeria is one of the worst countries for persecution in the world today. There have been deadly attacks on churches and mosques with members of the congregation and priests killed. 7600 Christians have been reported killed between January 2021 and June 2022 with eight churches under attack. Aid to the Church in Need is standing up for both Christians and Muslims suffering for the failure to enforce the rule of law.

John shared a number of personal testimonies from the survivors of attacks on churches which are outlined below.

Father Abayoni

Father Abayoni was attending Mass at St Francis Xavier's Church in Owo, a town in south-west Nigeria. On the day of the attack, the church was packed with parishioners, as it was Pentecost Sunday. Shots were fired and explosives thrown. Someone locked the entrance door and encouraged people into the sacristy. Children and adults clung to Father Abayoni and he sheltered them. They asked to be saved and to please pray for them. More explosions and shooting of guns were heard inside the church. 41 were killed and 70 injured at the church.

Margaret Attar

Margaret lost both legs and her sight in one eye after the bomb blast at St Francis Xavier's Church in Owo. Margaret was up in the church gallery singing in the choir when gunmen began shooting. She rushed downstairs and was caught in the blast. Margaret said that the lack of justice for the atrocity makes her feel insecure and gives the perpetrators more power to continue with their evil deeds.

John

John was attending St Rita's church in Kaduna. During the Eucharist there was an explosion and bodies piled on top of him. He was alive and regained sight after 13 operations in one eye.

Victoria

Victoria lost her leg but said that she retained her faith because all power belongs to God.

John shared the responses to the massacres from various clergy in Nigeria as outlined below:

Father Michael

For too long Father Michael felt he had been silent about the scale of the problem and he had a call from God to speak out about what was going on and to tell the world that Christians and other groups were being targeted. How is it possible for this to take place during broad daylight but nobody is charged? Unless justice is brought to bear nobody is safe. To get people to come to church is difficult as the perpetrators could strike again. The perpetrators are just sitting in the congregation waiting to strike.

Bishop Jude

Bishop Jude outlined the ways in which we could help the people in Nigeria. This included trauma counselling, helping repair the churches and also to call on the UK and Scottish Government to put pressure on the Nigerian Government to do more to bring these people to justice. There is a petition, and it is requested that we write to our governments to support this. The petition is on the website at acnuk.org (the petition has now closed).

Further information on the situation from John is below.

It is worth noting that an attack in Owo was outside the typical north where these attacks have been happening previously, so the area of threat is geographically widening. Archbishop Matthew, the Archbishop of Kaduna, has had to increase his own security. He has three security guards and five guard dogs to keep him safe.

The day after the massacre at Owo, Fiona Bruce MP, Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief stood up in Parliament and demanded that the UK Government give a statement in response to the massacre at Owo. It is the first anniversary of the Owo massacre that took place on Pentecost Sunday 5th June 2022, so we are very pleased that Fiona Bruce has personally agreed to take receipt of the petition on 5th June.

We have to recognise the complexity of the situation. Religion isn't the only driver of violence - the situation is exacerbated by politicisation and the illegal spread of arms. The power balance is shifting as a result of the spread of arms. However, religion is often underrepresented as a factor driving this conflict. Bishop Jude was very disappointed with the response to Owo given by the President of Ireland. One of the factors with the situation in Nigeria is climate change. Many of the Fulani herdsmen are having to find new farmland to graze their cattle and part of this is due to climate change. However, for Bishop Jude it was deeply insensitive when immediately following Owo the President of Ireland drew attention to climate change although it was a clearly an attack taking place in a church. The obvious cause it would seem would be an attack motivated by religious hatred or in a religious setting. For Bishop Jude alluding to the politics of climate change in this instance is completely inappropriate.

There is some collusion in terms of the motives of some of the more extremist groups. He says they all have the same aim and objective to establish an Islamic caliphate in Nigeria. They want to expand their territorial control of Nigeria's land and resources and to subjugate non-Muslims and Muslims who are not as radicalised as they are.

The UK has an enormous part to play in bringing influence and justice to bear in Nigeria. Nigeria is one of the top five recipients of UK aid alongside Ethiopia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Yemen. Although the UK has cut aid from 0.7% of GDP to 0.5% the UK's influence should not be underestimated. The trading relationship is very significant. 7.5 billion pounds in 2022, an increase of 78 percent on the previous year so the UK does have potential of some leverage.

There is a new President in Nigeria, Bola Tinubu, had a swearing in ceremony last Monday. He said he wanted to tackle rampant insecurity.

We recognise the complex issues of ethnicity and climate change and other factors at work, but we also need to recognise the religious dimension. In this instance Bishop Jude and others have attributed the violence to ISWAP (Islamic State's West Africa Province). They have a relationship with Isis which has been seen in Syria and Iraq and elsewhere. They have an Islamist agenda and are clearly attacking Muslims too who are 'soft' on the key tenets of Islam. There are also 'vagabonds' who are hoping to get money for example priests kidnapped for the hope of getting money. It's hard to know the exact causes when nobody has been brought to justice.

Responses from those attending the meeting:

James Fraser from Release International

James Fraser shared that they have been reporting on this for two decades and are in the middle of a three-month campaign to raise awareness because of the scale and regularity of these attacks and the fact that they do seem to be underreported and misunderstood in the West. Their key partner in Nigeria is the Anglican Archbishop of Jos, Ben Kwashi and he has been quite outspoken on this. He says that 43,000 people have been killed since 2009 plus 18,500 abducted and never seen again. 20 or 30 people are being killed per week. 130 were killed in one week in villages in April. We support people who have been displaced. As these Christian villages are attacked the residents have to flee and end up in internally displaced camps. Radical groups have stated an agenda that they want to wipe out Christianity from the area so we cannot ignore the religious dimension. Ben Kwashi suggested that kidnapping Christians is part of a deliberate strategy of some of these groups with an aim to impoverish them by paying a ransom for their release, marginalising the community in the north and central regions. Christian children are missing out on education further marginalising the community. Another figure that was quoted was that since 2009, 17500 churches have been destroyed and 2000 Christian schools.

There is the possibility of military collusion. One lady who had been receiving their project's trauma counselling said that the military were supposedly coming to comfort and protect the people in their village but people in military dress came to the village and joined in with the attack instead of protecting them. This has not yet been corroborated but it is not the only accusation of this practice.

It is important to add that this is not destroying the faith of the Christian communities of Nigeria. Their campaign is called 'Out of these ashes'. Ben Kwashi quotes in his book that despite the suffering of the people, out of these ashes the Christian community is working to bring transformation, is willing to forgive their attackers and is not defeated.

Questions and comments from attendees

Sally Foster-Fulton – What other faith groups are they working with to amplify the voice of Not in Our Name? Extremism is a global issue and if we stay in our corner and fight in our corner, we limit ourselves.

John Pontifex – We are working from the principle of Article 18 which recognises the right of the individual to choose their own faith. At the launch of the campaign our intention was to make it clear that this is not just about Christians standing up for Christians. That can create a colonial or crusader mentality that is risky for the Christians in situ and is also not an accurate representation of the situation.

Murdo Fraser MSP - What can the UK realistically do to helpfully intervene in what could become a failed state? As a former colonial power, I am not sure where our standing is in Nigeria.

John Pontifex – I am not suggesting that the petition is going to solve all the problems. Even if we are just making a statement we are speaking with conscience. We responded to the people in Nigeria discussed and said that we would do whatever they thought would be the

most effective and appropriate thing. This is one of the strengths of the campaign as it comes directly from people in Nigeria on their request, not us saying what is right for the people. The petition was written by the man in Nigeria and specifically his wording. He was clear that the UK could punch above its weight (for example the aid relationship and the trade relationship and the Commonwealth dimension) and particularly at a time with the new Nigerian Government coming in and they want to restore their standing as a government.

Murdo Fraser MSP – You alluded to the collusion between these extremist groups. What is the role of the Nigerian army? They have been ineffectual so far.

John Pontifex – they have been accused of colluding. How could sophisticated weapons move huge distances and who is paying for them? There are plenty of border controls in the country. There is a sense that at some level the Government may have played a part in that. The Government has to be held to account.

John Mason – I was struck by the quotes from one of the bishops about being silent for too long. The south of Nigeria is quite strongly Christian. Are the Christians in the south concerned about this and are they trying to put pressure on the Government or are they turning a blind eye to what is going on in the north?

John Pontifex – Bishop Jude has given interviews on this. In the south there is a tendency to think that this is a north Nigerian problem and to let them deal with it. The Owo atrocity demonstrated that this is a national problem not just the north of Nigeria and needs to whole community to come together to say enough is enough.

Chris Ringland from the Evangelical Alliance – what was the context of why the comments were made by the President of Ireland? Is there a role in raising awareness from a Scottish Parliament perspective through the MSPs?

John Pontifex – the Bishop was very disappointed and saw this as a sign of a complete gulf between how the West is superimposing their own narrative on the situation without really reading the situation on the ground. He was concerned to stand up to his community and make a response.

Steven Kerr MSP –When I was an MP at Westminster I was one of the vice-chairs of the APPG for Freedom of Religion and Belief and we did a public enquiry on Nigeria and so many people were willing to come along and tell Nigerians what was going on in their own country and were quite adamant that this was really driven by the conflict between the herders and the farmers and that this originated in climate change and that it had escalated because of the arms that had come south from Libya after the fall of the Gaddafi regime. Eventually before it was published several members of the House of Lords managed to redirect its narrative to include a stronger religious dimension.

Decision on what to take forward as a group.

John Mason – my feeling is that we should write to as many people as possible based on the wording of the petition and expand on it bringing in some of the figures mentioned by John and James. While foreign affairs are a reserved issue to the UK Government the Scottish Government does have ministers with an overseas remit. We are linked to Rwanda, Zambia, Malawi and Pakistan but we can clearly comment on any issues that we deem important. We have been given a strong steer from John to write (some countries are more reticent for this involvement). I suggest we write to the Scottish Government, the Westminster Government, Fiona Bruce and the all-party group at Westminster (who are able to do more in terms of enquiries) and writing directly to the high commission of the Nigerian Government.

John Pontifex – Our sense is to put pressure directly on the Nigerian Government.

James Fraser - When we launched our campaign there was a slight nervousness regarding contacting the Nigerian Government directly, but this was particularly connected to the elections which had just happened, but this has obviously passed. I would want to take advice if you were going to quote international partners in the letter and it would be good to see the content in advance.

John Mason – I like the idea of a Westminster-style enquiry which would be more work for Craig and for Maureen, but it has been done by other cross-party groups. Let's not make a decision on this tonight but it is something to think about and we will write to the full membership about it.

Suggestions for future meetings

Maureen suggested a meeting on Tibet. We last looked at this in December 2018. We have been trying to contact the Humanists but haven't managed to get a date for them yet. We are hoping to meet again after the summer and hoping to have four meetings a year if possible. The situation in India is difficult for people outside the majority religion. There was a meeting on India a while ago but could be looked at again. It would be worth looking at the Xinjiang again in China, particularly the situation of the Muslim Uyghur. It would be good to get a presentation from the Muslim community who could cover a number of areas. Two Yazidis from Iraq came to speak previously.