

Calls Intensify to Designate Nigeria's Boko Haram as Terrorist Group

Amid what is being termed as “genocide” of Christians by **Boko Haram** suicide bombers in Nigeria, Christians from this West African nation living in the U.S. have intensified their calls for the designation of the Islamist group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the State Department.

The Islamist group Boko Haram—whose real name is Jama’atul Alhul Sunnah Lidda’wati wal jihad, which translates as “People for the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad”—has killed more than 700 Christians in Nigeria this year thus far.

The Christian Association of Nigerian-Americans (CANAN) last week held a meeting with the Nigerian Ambassador to the U.S., Adebowale Adefuye, to apprise him of Boko Haram’s financial support and access to international groups for weapons, the association said on its website.

Association’s Executive Director Laolu Akande stressed that the Nigerian government alone would not be able to fight the Islamist group unless its finances and other resources are blocked through an FTO designation.

While **Boko Haram** was formed about a decade ago, it gained technical sophistication and weaponry in recent years from al-Shabaab in southern Somalia and the Mali-based al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb – FTO designated groups.

On Oct. 28, at least 15 people, mostly children and women, were killed and about 150 others were wounded after a suicide bomber from Boko haram attacked Saint Rita’s Catholic Church

in northern Nigeria's Kaduna city during Sunday morning service.

FTO designation makes it unlawful for any person or financial institution in the United States to knowingly provide material support or resources to the group. The State Department also encourages other governments to block finances for the named organizations.

Some African organizations – including the Africa Action, the Africa Faith & Justice Network, and the Eritrean Community for Human Rights & Refugee Protection—have opposed the calls for Boko Haram's FTO designation. They say the move would place militarism at the center of bilateral relations, undermine human rights organizations and potentially criminalize the work of international humanitarian and peacebuilding organizations.

“An FTO designation would effectively endorse excessive use of force at a time when abuses by Nigeria's security services have undermined the rule of law and facilitated radical recruitment. Boko Haram would gain credibility among global jihadists, and the more radical factions' critique of foreign influence would be validated,” the organizations told Secretary of State Hillary Clinton through an open letter in May.

While the FBI, the Justice Department and the Homeland Security Department have also recommended FTO designation for Boko Haram, the State Department thinks otherwise.

“Before we prescribe actions, it is important that we understand what Boko Haram is and what it is not,” Johnnie Carson, assistant secretary of state in the Bureau of African Affairs, was quoted as telling in his speech to the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights in April. “The truth is that our understanding is

limited at best," Carson added.

In June, the President Obama administration listed three Boko Haram leaders—Abubakar Shekau, Abubakar Adam Kamar, and Khalid al-Barnawi—as “Specially Designated Global Terrorists,” while refusing to declare the group as an FT0. Shekau is one of the most visible leaders of Boko Haram. Kamar and al-Barnawi have ties to Boko Haram and close links with al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb.

Carson also denied that Boko Haram was motivated by a religious ideology, saying that most of its followers had only sought to discredit the government—both under Goodluck Jonathan, the incumbent president who is a Christian, and his Muslim predecessor—for its “failure to provide services to people.”

Contrary to what Carson believes, Mohammad Yusuf, the cleric who formed the group was from the Salafi movement and who blamed all problems of the nation to Western education – “Boko Haram” translates as “Western education is sin.”

A key objective of Boko Haram behind its attacks on Christians in the north is to create a violent conflict between Muslims and Christians, so that the Muslim-majority north will ask for separation from the Christian-majority south. The group has called for Islamic Sharia law in the north. Boko Haram has also warned that all Christians living in the north must move to the south or else they will be killed.

Local Christian leaders understand what Boko Haram wants, and many of them have been urging Christian youth not to retaliate at any cost.

Moreover, Boko Haram turned its focus from government and police targets to Christians after the victory of President Jonathan, a Christian from the south, in April 2011.

It's not that Carson doesn't believe Boko Haram is a terrorist organization. He called it one during his speech, but his department is not yet willing to officially acknowledge it. "Boko Haram's emergence as a terrorist organization in Nigeria predates the current government...", he said.